

Underworld

by Electromotive Force

Category: Halo

Genre: Horror, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: OC

Status: Completed

Published: 2007-11-11 16:31:52

Updated: 2009-10-21 01:07:00

Packaged: 2016-04-26 23:34:12

Rating: T

Chapters: 35

Words: 197,437

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: In a distant, forgotten corner of the Milky Way, citizens of a desolate colony world somehow make ends meet amidst the Mecca of black market trade. And though a wretched hive of criminal existence, a far greater evil calculates beneath it all...and waits.

1. Prologue

Prologue****

Jim Carsa would never have thought he'd die young, but today was his day.

How Jim got here was still a mistake that nagged at him. He shouldn't have been so curious; he shouldn't have been so brave. He should have just gone about his normal day as any other, but curiosity got the better of him.

Heeding no advice from the signs posted at the cordons above, he ventured into the mines—and there was no way out now. The way he came from had collapsed. He had upset the delicate balance here somehow. Put his weight where it shouldn't have been or breathed too heavily or something.

Worse yet: there was no illumination. Even once his eyes finally adjusted to the absorbent dark, he still couldn't see much of anything. He had no choice but to proceed further into the unknown, and that's when he saw it.

He knew he was as good as dead when he spotted what stood before him: a pair of backlit orbs shining a sickly-green. Eyes—maybe a few meters away as far as he could tell.

Who, or what the eyes belonged to, he couldn't fathom. There was nothing that could live down here for more than a week.

Jim couldn't see anything but the eyes, which made his fright all the more justified.

Perhaps even more perturbing was the look in themâ€”placid. There was no thought behind them, as if the life of this being had long passed away into death. He could hear what could pass for breathing, though. A hoarse undulation of air coming from the general direction of the thing, more like a steady growl once it echoed off the bulwark of the mines. Jim wasn't sure what to do. He was frozen.

Would this thing leave him alone if he just stood still? Would it eventually recede back to the hellhole from whence it spawned?

As if to cordially answer these questions, the monster let out an awful shriek. The light from the eyes disappeared and they were goneâ€”one with the darkness. It huffed a deep breath, bellowed again, a deafening howl echoing in the void.

Jim felt a warm sensation dripping down his leg as he frantically looked around him for any sort of sight. He felt the world turn upside down as he became immersed in vertigo, knees shaking. Then, the eyes came back.

Although an unwelcome sight, the luminous green righted his world again. But he was far more scared than before...

The twin orbs were right in front of his face now with nothing inside them, just pure and unexplainable madness.

Jim heard a column of air move very fast, a whipping sound that lashed towards him. He felt a sting on the side of his head, then another.

Jim Carsa prepared to die, and the world turned ever black.

2. Rise and Shine

****Underworld****

****by****

****Electromotive Force****

Rise and Shine****

The world turned bright.

It happened on any spot on any planet with a consistent night-day cycle. White light upon waking upâ€”it was usually a welcomed sightâ€”finding its way to a colonist's eyes from the glowing ambiance of a morning dawn. Human visual perception eventually adjusted to the world and the fog of sleep roiled away, revealing the day. Humans were naturally daytime beings with the majority of one's consciousness spent in the light from eons of Earth-life bred into them, even in the waking epoch of interstellar travel.

Lightâ€”it was usually a welcomed sight.

But here, on the desolate surface of this world, it usually wasn't.

That's because there was utterly no beauty to behold on Traxus IX.

The sky was a steel-grey sheetâ€”always overcast in a gloomy, altostratus veil. On a more hospitable planet such as Harvest or Mamore or Earth, such clouds would shape the high troposphere, maybe capping a few mountaintops. But here, the singular and all-encompassing landmass of the planet presented conditions simulating mountain summits. The air was incredibly thin.

Life here was cold, dismal, confining and grey. A monochrome prison of misery.

Often times, the cloud layer would reside not too far above one's head, yielding nothing but dread for the claustrophobic. Occasionally, a ray of the sun would strike through the sullen squall lines along with some measure of happiness. A brief glimmer of starlight, even a gentle touch of warmth from it would only last a second. Even if someone happened to be blessed with such a rare and wondrous occasion, the landscape outside was far more anesthetizing than the lifeless heavens. For the grounds were an endless expanse of orange-brown dirt and clay as far as the eye could see.

The only break in the monotony were the foothills, the gentle rises and falls in the terrain. Mockeries of real scenery.

Aside from a naturally-occurring atmosphere, magnetosphere, and the appropriate gravitational and tidal forces, the planet was for all intents and purposesâ€”dead.

A pale-gold sliver of sunlight shone through an open door and struck one half of Justin Reid's face, barely waking him out of heavy slumber. His eyes fluttered just as the sun skittered behind a solid, colorless mass not an instant later. The light was gone and the world was grey again. He brushed a few brown strands of hair away from his eyes and tucked them behind his ear, hoping the light would return. But today, he wasn't going to be that lucky. Moments went by...he eventually relented and unzipped his sleeping bag, grabbed a corner of it and tossed it aside. He tried to pay no mind to the numbing cold that invited itself in.

He pushed himself up and stretched, then walked barefoot over a dirt floor to the far corner of the dwelling where a red plastic container sat. He grabbed the frosted handle and pulled upâ€”empty. Someone had forgotten to fill up the kerosene heater last night and the room was bitter cold because of it. He tried to remember whose turn it was.

He walked across the room with the legs of his thick sweatpants rubbing against each other with a _swoosh-swoosh._

"Pete!" he said, kicking the frame of a fold-out cot. The metal rang in reply, but the occupant under the woolen covers gave only a soft moan. "You forgot to fill up the heater!"

Pete wasn't answering. Probably wouldn't do so until he awoke hours later. Pete was the heaviest sleeper and a very forgetful person, maybe a bad friend sometimes too. "And you left the door openâ€”again!"

But Justin really couldn't harp on Pete too much, either. He was brain-dead himself half the time. Spirits came at a perpetual low on Traxus IX. The planet was perpetually cold and bleak. Each and every denizen of the colony was under living conditions below that of the galactic poverty line. The Milky Way's human epicenter of all things immoral was this world. Coincidentally, almost every material object on its way to and from outer colonies passed through as well. The worst stayed here, and the worst transited through here. The trafficked drugs and the trafficked humans, the warlords and terrorists, grand thieves and cons. There was no reason to ever hang on to hope here, even in dealing with the little things in life.

To add to the group's absentminded and careless nature, they were all habitual drug users. Justin, Pete, Bill, and Ken. All of them.

Justin opened a heavy steel door and thick, rusted hinges groaned in protest. He grabbed some more clothes and put them on to ward off the cold seeping into the network of steel cargo containers which served as their home.

The noise woke up more dwellers.

"Shit, son. Why so early?" a familiar voice said.

"Someone didn't turn on the heater last night, Bill." Justin said, gesturing toward Pete.

Bill Santhouse was Justin's best friend; he'd lost his way in life just as he did.

"Guess it's time to wake up anyway." Bill grunted.

Justin watched Bill rise, wincing from the aches of such an uncomfortable sleep. It was his unlucky turn to sleep on the floor.

Every now and then, the four of them would swap locations around the sleeping room, relinquishing a preferred spot to someone else. It was always the cot or the couch they sought after. Other than those two options, it was a sleeping bag over the dirt, no pillow. The cot was UNSC standard issue, stolen from a stockyard near town which was in turn probably stolen from a shipment heading to a prospect colony somewhere near the galactic rim. Some soldier's makeshift resting place, not anymore. It was actually very comfortable and very sturdy, but you dare not change sleeping position lest you wanted to roll over and fall to the floor. No one remembered who had stolen it so long ago, but that really didn't matter. They had it and that's what counted. Thievery was just a daily part of life on Traxus IX—everyone knew that. You had to get by somehow.

The couch was very comfortable, dark-red velvet, soft and wide. You could stretch your legs out for days on it. And the arm rests were just as supple as the plush cushions, its only drawback being that it was covered in mold and lichens, most likely a result of it being left out in the rains too long before the four of them picked it up from a shadier part of town. Therefore it would be in one's best interests not to sleep face down, but Ken didn't seem to care about the health risks of sleeping that way. He was conked out. He'd probably sleep there for another day just recuperating from the wild

marijuana binge the group had been on for the last forty-two hours. Locks of his blonde hair were strewn over the cushion, covering his half-buried face. Justin smiled, watching him sleep so peacefully.

Justin then opened a steel door that adjoined one container to the next. There, sitting on a wooden pallet was Bill, firing up the heater. He had his wool blanket laid over the wooden pallet for some measure of comfort while the vent pumped out warm air. "What do you have going on today?" Bill asked, his unusually deep voice more baritone than usual.

"I think I'm gonna go to work today."

"More? You should be racking up some overtime by now, huh?" Bill scratched his head of dark hair.

"I'm too awake for anything else."

"Don't work too hard, you know?"

"Believe me, I know. I'll see you later on tonight."

"Roger that, soldier boy."

Justin scoffed as he walked away.

Justin had another life once, long before he entered the prison-like world of Traxus IX. A better time, they figured. Any time and place could've been better than the one here on this desolate world. Once a Marine in the UNSC, he never liked to talk about his days as a troop. Certainly never talked about what landed him here. Bill, Pete and Ken seldom brought up the past. It was better that way.

Justin walked out the open door of the atrium containerâ€”just one, giant piece in their steel conglomerate of living quarters. Four cargo containers joined into one, courtesy of Traxus Heavy Industries. They had about a thousand square feet between them, which wasn't bad. He went further inside to put shoes on and get heavier clothes.

Traxus Heavy Industries was an interstellar corporate giantâ€”turned empireâ€”that placed its busiest freight hub on Traxus IX. They more or less owned the entire planet. T-09 was the Colonial Military Administration's formal designation of this giant dirtball in old survey archives. The name was easy and so it stuck. Coincidentally, THI had an acute interest in the place. The mega-corporation turned T-09 into their HQ of operations literally overnight, making it the Mecca for slipspace cargo container fabrication and interstellar shipping.

And so the planet was named thereafter, Traxus IX. Though a cold ball of dirt, it was the prime selection for their business needsâ€”for a number of reasons. The planet's crust had vast amounts of metal and alkali deposits making it the ideal facilitator for heavy industry, namely the shipping industry. Heavy cargo containers was the chief export of this planet and quite possibly the only export. Additionally, the planet was located equidistant between Reach and the farthest of the outer colonies, making it a logistical delight for anyone who sought to gain profit in a galactic business

worldâ€"corporations, privateers, the UNSC, even pirates and rebels. THI did not discriminate. If you shipped it, chances were THI had a hand in it.

And just like any other business, the execs and the shareholders depended so much on the laborers, the skilled technicians and the front line supervisors to fuel the fire of trade and commerce. Kickbacks and crooked deals were rampant from day one. Unfortunately for the common folk of Traxus IX, this meant austere living conditions with sub-standard compensation to boot.

After much of the United Rebel Front had been dispatched by the UNSC, the impulsive startup enterprise guaranteed its success far into the future by claiming this planet as their primary hub and was probably the only reason the United Nations Space Command had the materials and the logistics support to continue pioneering the outer colonies in the first place.

Before setting out for work, Justin looked back at the place he called home for a minute. It wasn't much, but it was home. He wheeled around to face due North. On a smog-choked horizon, bright lights from factories set the haze aglow in the early sun. That was his destination, his livelihood. He walked over to his vehicleâ€"froze in his own steps. A cold lump formed in the pit of his stomach. He glared at the empty patch of dirt where his vehicle should've been.

He was so infuriated, all he could do was shout, "Someone stole my fucking Mongoose!"

He stormed back into his metal igloo with a stiff, outstretched arm, the heavy door forcefully swinging to its max angle as he entered. It rebounded off the inner wall with a metallic clang!

He charged into the heater room where Bill was. "Did you guys forget to chain up the Mongoose?"

"â€|No." Bill answered truthfully. A bewildered Bill hadn't seen Justin this angry in a very long time. There was only one time, Bill now remembered. "I'm sure someone locked it up." he said submissively as possible.

Justin took a breath. "I'm sorry for yellingâ€|"

"That's okay. I understand your anger."

Justin flexed his shoulders, asked, "None of the others chained it up after their shift?"

"Not that I know of, but I'm sure they did. They know better."

Justin left the heater room and swung his boot as hard as he could into Pete's cot.

"What the fuck?" Pete shouted, shaken from sleep.

"Wake up, fart blossom!" Justin said.

"Where's the fire?!"

"Did you remember to lock up the Mongoose last night? Don't friggin' lie to me."

"Of course I did! I'm not as dumb as you look."

"Well then why is it gone, smart one?"

"Relax. I lent it to the new kid."

Justin laughed in amusement, on the verge of going mad. "New kid?" He bent down so his nose hovered just off Pete's face and looked him square in the eyes, whispered, "_What _new kid?"

"Can you please just relax and back up? It's the new kid that came in yesterday. Don't you remember?"

"No."

"You don't remember the kid that came in last night and smoked up with us? Wait, of course you don't..." Pete laughed, "you were wasted to high heaven!"

"Bloody Elisa, now I got no ride to work."

"Don't sweat it, man, it's justâ€"

"â€"Don't _sweat_ it? You _do _remember how far it is to work. That's the whole reason I got that ATV in the first place. Tell me you haven't drank away your last, stupid brain cell."

"Let me finish, asshole. The kid is already at work." Pete checked his wristwatch. "He'll be back from shift change any minute."

"I'll be late."

"Since when does that matter?"

"Ugh. Shit."

Justin stormed back out of the house and waited for this new "kid" to arrive. He'd put him in his place before he left for work.

3. Fresh Meat

**Fresh Meat**

Justin saw his Mongoose all-terrain vehicle bobbing up and down in the distance. The brown dirt tinged orange as it rose behind the treads and met the sunrise. Justin anticipated the new guy pulling up in the vehicle. He pictured a fresh, scared pair of eyes. Alone and wary in a new world.

And such a world to be new to.

He thought about walking up to the new guy as he pulled up, personally shutting off the ignition and grabbing him by the shirt collar to throw him off before driving away.

Justin was furiousâ€”a combination of his own, pitiful existence and the fact that his neuro-chemical balance was so out of whack from years of drug use. But no matter how much Justin already despised this guy whom he hadn't even met, he wouldn't let something so small completely undo him. Times here were hard enough, and he remembered when he first arrived on Traxus IX, remembered just how serious a situation could become in the blink of an eye. He also remembered that even in the darkest hour of his life there were still people out there of good will...however hard they were to stumble upon. Time would tell if he'd ever pay it forward.

For now, there were some ground rules to be set for this new "kid".

The day had fully arrived. The full circumference of the sun had broke through the lowest reaches of sky, and the vehicle and the rider on it gradually grew in size until the vapor-emitting spec on the horizon was no more than a gravball field away. Justin marched back inside to grab the kerosene jug, scowling at Pete as he walked back out into the cold, Pete flipping Justin the bird before falling immediately back into a deep sleep on the cot.

The ATV pulled right up to the spot where it should've been all along. Dismounting the vehicle was a young kid, slightly short with average build.

Justin realized his fist was balled up. He took a breath and let go of his rage as the kid killed the engine and set the brake, strolling up to him with an outstretched palm. "Hey, my name is Chris."

Justin shook it and eyed him more closely. "Name's Justin. And you're wearing my helmet."

Chris instantly undonned it, quickly placing it in Justin's hand. He had an optimistic disposition about him that Justin readily noticed. He stuck out like colors on this cold world, like a ray of sunshine himself.

"Nice to meet you." Chris said. "How long have you lived in _this place? By the way, thanks for letting me use your ride."

"I didn't let you use my ride. Pete let you use my ride. And I've lived here for a long time, the longest out of anyone. This means you play by my rules. This is my place and my things which means you don't touch anything unless I offer. You can choose to accept that, or you can scuttle your butt back into town." Justin said, pointing way out into the horizon.

Chris swallowed as he looked back over his shoulder. He took in the barren vista: cold, empty and bleak. And beyond, the suffocating fallout of a smog-congested city. "N-no," Chris stuttered, "I don't think I can live there."

"Sounds like a deal."

"I mean, it seems fine to work for a few hours, but I don't think they enforce any of the UEG safety standards over there."

Justin didn't say anything more, only looked the kid up and down. Chris didn't belong hereâ€”that much, Justin knew.

Chris looked around awkwardly as Justin continued to stare at him.
"So what is there to do here besides work?"

"Get high."

"Seriously?" Chris frowned.

"Seriously. What else is there?" Justin studied the new kid with more scrutiny now and figured it out. "You have no idea where you are, do you?"

Chris glanced around himself, a natural quirk of his when nervous or unsure. "Traxus Nine?"

"Okay, so you _do_ _know_ where you are. Why are you here?"

"Just knew that Traxus Nine was a good place to find work."

Justin smiled as he eyed Chris in what amounted to half pity, half amusement. "Oh man, that's great. I'm glad you came here because that is the best line I've heard in a long time. Who told you that, Family? Your friends back home?"

"â€|Yeah." Chris squared his stance at Justin.

"That's only _half_ the story..." Justin said, casually brushing by and taking a seat on the Mongoose. "This is the _best_ _place_ to find work. Only thing is, you can never leave."

Chris looked around again, more erratically. A newfound look was coming over the kid's promising outlook, a look of fear. Justin reveled in it.

Chris then narrowed his eyes at him. "What do you mean I can never leave? I don't understand."

"This is our destiny, our prison. You've just been served a life sentence." Justin said with a sinister grin.

"Pleaseâ€|I'm new here and I don't feel like getting punked right now. I traveled here for weeks illegally and I just started my first day of work and I'm really tired, so with your _permission_ I'd like to crash on the couch."

Justin lit up a cigarette, said, "Do I look like I'm trying to punk anybody? Does this face look like a funny face?"

Chris stared back at Justin with disbelief. "Okay, why is it I can't leave here?"

"Traxus Heavy Industries, the company you just offered up your services to, prides itself as the best shipping business in the galaxy. This means they love it when production is running smoothly. We work our asses off, and in return they drop off supplies to us on this ghost planet. Food, water, the essentialsâ€|you know."

"Tell me what this has to do with what you just said."

"THI will never provide you transport off this rock. And the only

people that know this secret are the ones living here. There's no way out. They keep us here because everyone wants out. Planet's a cesspool. Has been ever since THI claimed the planet for their shipping business. What you and your friends back home don't know is that this place is under shared ownership with the criminal underworld, a kind of unspoken agreement." Justin smiled wider. "But now you know." He fired up the Mongoose. "And you can't have the couch. Ken is already sleeping on it."

"Wait!" Chris shouted. "Can I come with you?"

4. Ice Breaker

Ice Breaker

Justin thought about the request for a moment as he walked around to the front of the Mongoose and fastened the red fuel canister to its luggage rack. After securing it for the ride, he stood up and scanned the horizon with concern.

"Get on."

Justin practically ordered Chris as if he were a tough-loving father speaking to his child.

Chris obediently hopped on the back of the Mongoose to ride pillion, placing his weight on the rear boot pad and his grip around the handle just aft of Justin's seat. It wasn't exactly a comfortable position to stand for long periods of time. He knew he'd be in for some chop.

"Why do you want to come with me?" Justin asked while he donned his helmet.

"I thought you could get me acquainted, show me the ropes."

"Guess it wouldn't hurt you."

Justin gunned the throttle to get going, then eased off into a brisk cruise over the smooth, dirt landscape. The thick clouds overhead laid lifeless, almost low enough to touch if they chose to traverse the small outcropping due west of their vector. Motoring along parallel to the landmark, it was probably the only topographic feature on all the planet of such height. Then again, Justin had never seen much of the planet beyond his own, small existence here. He had a domain. He kept to his usual routes and establishments, and kept to himself. He never ventured out into the unknown, not without good reason. There was just no need to, and no want to. The world was a dangerous place, teeming with felonious activity from street to street and beat to beat, a wretched hive of existence. For the kid's own sake, Justin hoped he would mind his own business and learn to settle into a routine.

But to the horizon he was headed, a great deal of distance to go.

"Alright, your in-brief." Justin glanced rearward to Chris before locking his gaze ahead. "In case you haven't noticed, it's cold here, get used to it. And the sun doesn't set in the way you're probably

accustomed to. Here, it's the North."

"Why the North?"

"The planet's spin-axis is locked at ninety-degrees straight towards the star. North is truly up."

"Well, if that's the case, then wouldn't it be light all the time in one spot and dark everywhere else?"

Justin's grip tightened on the handle bars. "I'm getting to that. Something large smacked this planet upside the head x-billion years ago and we move on two axes now. We're not just spinning, we're tumbling. This means it's hard to tell when it's dawn or dusk. The two are more or less the same in most places."

"But there was a night...last night."

"That's because we've recently entered a solstice, which means there's a definite night-day cycle now, one you could set your watch by for years to come."

"Well, that seems normal. How long will it last for?"

"I don't know. You could find out by researching the geologic record, looking for the layers of different magnetization. But you're not that smart. And I'm sure if you had access to the UNSC Public Astronomy Archives, you'd find out. But you won't."

A sudden gust of headwind kicked up, blasting the Mongoose's occupants rearward a slight amount. Justin countered with more throttle and Chris hardened his stance on the bootpad, shouting over Justin's shoulder into the incoming current, "Why do you live so far away from the factory?"

"So people can't find us."

"No one knows where you live?"

"Just the four of us."

"Not even your boss?"

"Not even my boss."

"Why?"

"Because you can't trust anyone here. You remember that."

"You trust Pete and the others."

"That's different."

Chris tried to understand and took Justin's word. "But you know it wouldn't be that hard for anyone to find you. You're a straight shot from the city."

"Makes it easy for us. No twists, no turns. No chance of getting lost."

"No chance of trouble."

"You catch on quick."

Chris couldn't tell if Justin had meant that sarcastically or not. He was stone-faced, incredibly hard to read, and he was one tough cookie by the sheer looks of it. Justin obviously had seniority over the group too. As if his transition to a new world hadn't been hard enough, Chris wasn't off to a great start with him so far, which wasn't in his best interests. Chris needed to make friends quick, but he surely wasn't about to go kissing any ass. He was new here and kissing ass would only leave a first impression he didn't want. He would become everyone's bitch for his time here. Chris chose right then and there on the bumpy Mongoose ride to sit on the sidelines, spectate, and observe the lay of the land before stepping out of his box. Still, human nature couldn't change in an instant nor even overnight. The ways of men were deep-seeded and hard to break. To no fault of his own, Chris was simply good-natured. But he felt the overwhelming need to tighten up from here on out and ruffle his feathers a bit.

At a place like this, he had to be on his guard. All kinds of people he'd never imagined lived here.

"How the hell did you put in a full day's work and make it home in one piece anyway?" Justin asked.

"Iâ€¦I don't know. The workers at the factory were very helpful. They got me through the day."

"Just when I thought this place was running low on surprises." Justin mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing. How old are you?"

"Just turned sixteen last month, by Sol calendar that is."

Justin's eyes widened. "Sol, no shit? Always dreamed of going there, the place where it all started."

"It's not all that special. Just another sphere with people on it."

"Yep."

The Mongoose trotted along. The outcropping of rock to the west gradually faded and tapered down into the rest of the barren plains, revealing a broader field of vision. More cities could be seenâ€"two that were visible to the naked eye, and more still that were fully obscured by industrial fallout and the hazy nature of Traxus IX itself. Suddenly, Justin tightened his grip on the handle bars, raised himself in a half-stance and shouted, "Hold on!"

The Mongoose surged forth at breakneck speed just before the mutli-link suspension jounced up with sudden ferocity. Chris felt his spine compress as his view angle tilted unnervingly upwards, and before Chris knew it the Mongoose went airborne.

All the weight in his body fell to nothing as he hung on for dear life in brief freefall. Totally horizontal, he pulled himself as close to the Mongoose as he could, almost resting his chin on Justin's shoulder until he regained his footing on the boot pad. He risked a look down: they were more than twenty feet off the deck and coming down awfully fast for what looked to be a hard landing. He gritted his teeth to prevent concussion at the fall and held on as tight as he could.

But the stinging rebound didn't come. Instead, he opened his eyes and saw firm ground underneath them. He exhaled.

Chris looked back and saw they had landed on an incline not unlike the one they ascended a moment before, one of many natural formations scattered across the planet. "Nice move." Chris complemented.

"Yep. That's an old impact crater. I hit it whenever I need a jump-start. You held on good back there. You were Superman there for a minute."

"Superman?"

"Don't worry, kid. We'll break you in to comics too."

Chris placed his hands on Justin's shoulders and stood taller, looking on ahead. Chris held a stinging sensation in his tensed hands from the engine's vibrations channeling through the passenger handle. It seemed to worsen now that he let off for some relief. He tried to shake it away and looked back to the horizon ahead. It didn't seem that any more surprises were in store, so he relaxed a little and took the most comfortable stance the Mongoose would allow him, and saw that Justin's jacket had ruffled from the fall, revealing his bare neck. At the base of it was a peculiar, metallic ring. Chris instinctively went to touch it, but checked the motion. He wasn't about to go touching the back of someone's neck. Especially, someone who seemed so volatile. If Chris had any people skills whatsoever—he did—he knew that Justin was a moody guy. So instead, he eyed it more closely. It was definitely metal with some sort of flat, hexagonal fastener securing it to the skin. The apparatus itself looked hollow—like a receptacle of some sort, complete with a dust cap covering the hole. He had heard about these sorts of apparatuses before. "Hey, you've got a Neural Interface!"

Justin didn't say a word—he instead flipped his collar up to hide his neck—and sped on.

The rest of the ride went on in silence as the factories grew bigger and the lights grew brighter. And the smoke became almost omnipresent. Managing a breath on Traxus IX was already hard enough from the high elevation. And the thickening smog made it that much harder.

Finally for what seemed like a thirty minute ride, they reached the outskirts of City 17, Chris' inadvertant new livelihood.

Even though Chris literally came from this way not even an hour ago from his first night shift, he couldn't help but look around. The sights were still unfamiliar to him. So far, Justin had made it sound like he needed to learn quickly—to hit the ground running and show

his game face. So far, he'd been damned lucky he didn't lose his way back to Justin's home; he'd been damned lucky that it was a straight shot to and from work. He seized the moment and took a good, hard look around: the city wasn't actually all that bad. He figured that every major establishment had its good and bad parts, but the present scene was actually quite inviting. The streets were clean and there were broad courtyards all around. While barren and lackluster, they held a quaint attempt at a town square. He could imagine on a more forgiving planet there would be grass and trees and swings, kids playing, road signs that were perhaps overinformative, and shopping malls and bazaars around the periphery.

"Get used to calling this place home." Justin announced, keeping his gaze straight ahead.

The Mongoose moseyed further on into town. Another short outcropping slowly lifted itself from the plains to their west, maybe two men high. It cordoned off the west side and stretched on for miles into the unknown. Justin darted a short distance to one side of the street where a fork in the road beckoned. At the split, Justin came to a dead stop. "See the way off to the left?"

The road was straight and ran right alongside the drawn out ledge to their left, fading into a grim darkness of fog and chemical. It was a forbidding path, chilling and menacing as if traveling down that road meant traveling straight into the pits of a nightmare. "Do you see it?"

"Uh-huh."

"You don't go that way. You don't ever go that way. It's bad news."

"What sort of bad news?"

"Gangs, war lords, black marketeers, you name it. You go down that way, you're as good as dead. People will kill you for the clothes you wear."

Chris had never seen anything like it, the never-ending welcome mat of rust-yellow chemical haze. "Okay."

"Not okay! You wouldn't last thirty seconds down that road!"

"I said okay!"

Justin looked away. "Good. Let's move on."

He goosed the throttle and sped over to the street stemming off to the right, the good street. Directly off this right fork was a huge courtyard of dirt surrounded by a few structures, maybe five stories tall each—what looked to be office buildings pockmarked with windows. The low-flying clouds and the smog binding to them cradled the rooftops. The easements were a swept-clean, bleach-white concrete. High standards considering the makeup of the rest of the world. Chris even made out Doric order columns at the façade of each establishment, more dressing than anything structurally-beneficial. All of the buildings were pre-fabbed to begin with, easily mass-produced and transportable in sections, and already equipped to handle the pedestrian traffic of any large city. However, the mix of

Khrushchovkan and Greco-Roman architectures not only exuded class, but did so on a planetary scale as every other factory-city's admin district was identical. Even the microdistricts near the factories themselves were all homogeneous in layout, right down to the centimeter (as consistent as the fabrication facilities off-world could make them).

"These are the administrative offices." Justin announced with one hand on the throttle, one hand gesturing outwards. "You go here to discuss any issues with management or just to get away for a while. They have nicer bathrooms and excellent snacks, but don't linger for too long. Remember that they pride themselves on high production numbers."

Chris shook his head in confusion. "So, we don't get paid...why do you like to spend so much time here at work?"

"The factory is more of a home than my own. I take it you didn't spend too much time in my metal igloo."

"Just partied with you guys a little last night, then I went to work. That's what I came here for."

"Right." Justin said with a frown. "Well, here at the factory is everything you need. Showers, hot meals, entertainment, everything."

"Why?"

"At first, it was company strategy to keep people there as long as possible. Business would only benefit from such an extravagant facility. But now it's because nowhere else is safe, and most people that live outside the factory have nothing just like me."

"And your igloo. _That's_ not safe?"

"As safe as it gets without living in the factory."

"Why not just live here?"

"You get tired of the same walls after a while, and you have to look at the same old faces everyday and put up with all their bullshit. The less people, the better."

Chris shrugged his shoulders.

"Trust me," Justin cautioned, "try it out for a while. It won't take long."

"Soâ€¦you have the best of both worlds." Chris offered.

"You could say. But it couldn't have been done without the other guys and this Mongoose." Justin broke out into a snickering grin. "We stole it during the heat of a gang war far from here."

"Where exactly was that?"

"Down the road I told you to stay away from. Now that you've arrived, I'm thinking of stealing another so we don't have to keep sharing the same Mongoose all the time."

Chris remained silent.

"Recognize this place?" Justin asked as he sped towards the end of the courtyard.

"Vaguely. I came here when it was dark and I left when it was dark, too. Plus, I think I was still loopy from last night."

"So what was your poison last nightâ€"smoke or drink?"

"Little bit of both, I think."

"Thatta boy!"

For the first time since they had met, they shared a smile. "But I can't say I really enjoyed it all that much."

As they neared the very end of the open courtyard, the Mongoose approached a downward slope, probably somewhere around a negative fifteen degree gradient. The ten-meter wide path ran right under an impressively-fortified wallâ€"the perimeter of the factory complex.

Now that it was light out, Chris could see an inscription on the face of the wall they were about to delve through.

LET THE FREE MARKET REIGN!

Just as Chris finished reading the statement, the world around him grew completely dark.

The only illumination from under this dense bulwark was from the headlight of the Mongoose itselfâ€"coasting to a titanium-meshed gate in the shadowy distance. Sentries stood post on either side with shotguns and pistols at the ready. They eyed the ATV's riders cunningly as it approached.

"You remember _these_ guys, don't ya?"

"How could I forget?" Chris mumbled.

"Did they treat you okay last night?"

"Yeah, got through just fine."

"Well, it's a miracle you didn't get jacked up your first day. Take it from me, these are words for the wise: keep your cards close to your chest, if you know what I'm sayin'. Keep a straight face, don't make any sudden movements and don't mention anything about this vehicle being stolen. And don't say anything about drugs because they'll probably want some from you, and I don't feel like wasting time on bullshit today. In factâ€"it's better if you don't speak at all."

"Gee, thanks."

"You're talking."

Chris huffed in frustration.

"You're huffing."

Chris literally bit his tongue as he remained perfectly silent and perfectly still.

"Better."

Justin crept the ATV up to the gate at a snail's pace so the guards could get a good look at them. A third sentry from behind the entryway appeared from the darkness and slowly approached the two of them. With the two other sentry's weapons trained on the ATV, the lone guard had them dismount the vehicle. "ID please." the officer ordered.

Justin handed over a memory cube—a clear crystal with microscopic bits of data embedded within. Pits and lands invisible to the naked eye.

The man ran a handheld cobalt-blue LASER scanner over its surface, and instantly the electronics verified his credentials. The guard then focused on Chris.

"Um-uh—" Chris began.

"He's new here." Justin offered coolly.

"How lucky." he replied back with a smirk.

"He'll be with me the whole time."

"Very good," the guard uttered with no particular expression on his face, "proceed."

A quartet of deadbolts cycled out of both the ceiling and the floor from the twin partitions of titanium mesh. They smoothly split in half and opened inwards, revealing the path to the interior. Justin fired up the Mongoose once again and Chris mounted his boots on the back.

Once clear of the threshold, Chris said, "Sorry. I looked pretty stupid back there, huh?"

"At ease, soldier, you did well."

Chris looked over his shoulder past the woven gateway, past the sentries, and up the ramp—at the world outside they left behind. For some reason, he felt so much safer now. "So why aren't the Admin offices protected? Aren't the bosses like the most important people here?"

"Yes, they are. Which is exactly why they don't need the protection that the factory has."

"That doesn't make _any _sense."

"Look where you are, kid. This whole place is senseless. Why would anyone want to live here?"

"I don't know. I guess no one would."

Justin smiled. "And yet you came."

"_I_ didn't know it was going to be like this." Chris said defensively.

"Relax, man, I'm just yankin' your crank. Nobody else knew either. You see, everyone knows _now_â€"even the gangs and the dealers and the junkiesâ€"that you don't mess with the company. And the bosses are company property. Everyone knows _now_ _that_ if you cut off production, the company cuts off supplies. _Nobody_ wants that."

"Where do supplies come from?"

"From a THI space station in low orbit. Space planes from the station fly by the facility and air drop our sustenance once a week. Happens all over the planet at each factory-city."

"Okay," Chris said, "I think I get it."

"We have our own little ecosystem here, no matter how twisted it seems. You'll come to learn that quickly. _Very_ _quickly_ if you go down the left fork. The road we don't go down, right?"

"Right. So the only people vulnerable are us?"

"Factory workers, yes."

"So why doesn't the company treat _us_ like their property. I mean, we're working for _them_. What's the deal with that?"

"We're expendable." Justin said resolutely. "It takes too many company resources and too much money to provide protection for every employee. Plus, the factories aren't big enough to provide shelter for everyone. You have to work your way up and earn that priveledge...or wait until someone grows old and dies or gets picked off by the way of the world. Then you can move up one rung in the corporate ladder. To those that are forced to live outside the factory, they live a good deal from it so they don't get messed with after their shift ends, but at least the company gave away a decent amount of transport. Even the fuel is free, but it's not like we don't pay for everything here with our lives anyways. I mean, we keep hearing that quarterly profits are going towards expansion of the city walls, but it's all a crock. As long as THI has a lead in the Big Three, they could care less about a few peasants being offed every now and then."

"What's the Big Three?"

It's a competitive business triangle between Traxus Heavy Industries, Cobb Industries, and Tterrab Industries. All in the freight business and Traxus has a stranglehold on them for having this world in its possession."

"What about the population? With all the violence and the treatment here, how does the company find the manpower to sustain their operations? I doubt any guy looking for a job would come here if they knew what this place was really like...right?"

"Believe me, if THI recruited their prospective employees by pitching the location and living conditions, they'd be out of business. And guess what? That would mean the United Nations Space Command can't go any further in the colonization effort. Not to mention, the flow of shipment _anywhere _would bottleneck itself. If that ever happened, some kind of intervention would need to take place."

"So where do the workers come from? Are they _all _criminals?"

"Most of them, yes. _But...there's a sucker born every minute. And Traxus Nine pulls 'em in all the time like a black hole. Take for instance, _you_."

"It's hard to believe I'm stuck here."

"Better start getting used to it because it ain't gonna change, and don't screw yourself by hoping it will."

"I can't believe this." Chris whispered into the surrounding darkness. "I had plans."

"Well, you can forget about plans. You can forget about happiness too. Survival is as good as it gets. What kind of plans does a sixteen year old kid have these days anyway? Why would they bring you here? Shouldn't you be in school right now or some shit?"

"I may be young, but I didn't plan on making this my home!"

Okay, relax, relax. Let's hear your plans. Sound off."

"I came here for the money. I just needed a little to hold me over until I hit a certain age."

"What then?"

"I was going to enlist in the Marines."

Justin didn't answer.

"You don't like to talk about it, huh?"

"Anyone ever tell you you ask too many fuckin' questions?"

"Do you always answer a question with a question?"

Justin nailed both the front brakes and rear brakes all at once and the Mongoose screeched to a halt, the sudden inertia almost flinging Chris over the driver. Justin spun around on his seat and bored his steely gaze right into Chris. "Rule number one:" Justin said in a preprogrammed tone. "You don't ever ask me about the Marines. I don't talk about it. You don't care. Got it?"

Chris suddenly felt alone. He swallowed and nodded in reply to Justin as the emptiness of the tunnel seemed to grow darker around him. He then mustered, "Okay."

Justin hit the throttle and accelerated again, his disposition instantly changed as if nothing bad ever happened.

The remainder of the trip was silent again. Chris took the

opportunity to study his surroundings while Justin drove through the straight tunnel of darkness. Chris knew they were en route to the main complex, but he wished Justin would speed it up. Chris didn't like being alone in the dark. It was a wonder he made it through here before all by himself. He silently uttered his thanks that the ATV's lights were in good working condition. He was also grateful for the tunnel being a straight shot, much like the way home was._.

Homeâ€”Chris just realized he might never see it again. The reality of it just _hit_ home. He forced back the tears. He was strong. He had made it for weeks as a stowaway, across light-decades of endless space surviving off the cargo of space-faring vessels like a shoplifting rat. He could surely make it on this planet if he made it this far. And on a brighter side, he would never have to journey alone again. He had a new set of friends that would look after him, hopefully. They seemed hot-headed and short-fused, but was there anything really wrong with that? Could anyone blame them for it?

Justin was an ex-Marine, the kind of figure Chris so admired and aspired to be. Though, that dream of Chris' fizzled into extinction the moment he set foot on Traxus IX just like most dreams here.

But some individuals here were already living their dreams, their criminal underworld. Pawns in a race for sovereigntyâ€”

â€”for an empire in Hell.

5. History Lesson

**History Lesson**

The darkness surrendered to cold, pale light again. The Mongoose had cleared the shadow of the tunnel. Rising up a slope, Justin and Chris emerged at the main courtyard of City 17.

Cities on Traxus IX differed from those of most colony worlds. They were a great deal smaller, simply because the factory _was_ the cityâ€”with its own utilities, municipal services, and its own code. Chris began to wonder why the government officials of a planet would name their pillars of order after numbers. But he dismissed the negligent nomenclature as just honesty in ironic form of the purest. The planet surely had plenty of irony about it to go around. After all, cities were usually named after people, places, or thingsâ€”all usually of a world's making, of accomplishment or noteworthiness. What had this world made?

Chris stopped his musings on the small things and paid closer attention to different details. Surrounding the concrete courtyard was immense fortification. They were completely enclosed, save for the tunnel they entered through. Before Justin eased off the throttle, Chris could feel the air temperature rising higher the farther in they rode.

Roughly, Justin and Chris sat in the middle of a diamond-shaped vestibule the size of a gravball field.

They were dwarfed by the ramparts on all sides and the sheer amount

of square footage of the ground they occupied. Justin paused here so Chris could take a good look around before proceeding further on. To the left side facing North-east was a huge rectangular complex of metal and stone adjacent to the perimeter fortification, as was the same deal on the opposite wall facing South-east. Two huge complexes butted up against the barrier walls of the city. And atop each massive, perimeter wall were meter-wide causeways that wrapped around the entire courtyard in a horseshoe fashion, breaking just above the tunnel exit. That high, a man could see for miles and miles out of the city. And at the very tip of the square sitting on the East wall sprawled a spire of great height, an oddity how Chris only now noticed its mass looming so treacherously overhead, dwarfing him like an ant. With its thick trunk embedded deep inside the east wall, it could probably take a cyclone head-on, it was so stout. Chris was fixated on its placid, prevailing beauty. Justin took notice.

"That's the lookout point. We're not really allowed up there, but I could convince the boss to let me give you a tour of the place."

"Cool."

"But that'll come later. Those buildings to the side," Justin gazed outward, "is where all the manufacturing takes place. You already know that."

"Where is everybody?"

"What?"

"There's no one out here."

"That's because they're all inside working."

"No one goes outside?"

"No, not really."

"Smoke breaks?"

"Those can be done inside. There's stack-scrubbers overhead that can, or at least _should _filter everything out."

"What about just taking a break...to go outside?"

"Chris, not everyone is the same as you, okay?"

"Well, then why is the courtyard so huge?"

Chris' eyes bulged as he looked around, intent on hearing a worthy answer.

Justin then looked around as well.

The boy was right. The courtyard beneath their feet was a lot of concrete. Expansive and flat.

"Um, you know...I really don't know why." Justin replied. "But I don't really care anyway. I don't run this place."

Justin began to incite throttle and crept up to the East wall, just shy of the enchanting pyramid that Chris so awed over. Dipping below the spire was another tunnel. "Down and through there," Justin continued, "is Shipping and Receiving. That's where some of the less-than-honorable transactions take place. It'll be some time before you're ready to step foot in there."

Justin righted the Mongoose around and made towards the factory sub-complex to the left at the Northeast side. A motion sensor picked up his approach from a few meters off and the hangar bay below it parted in half, riding on tracks half-sunken into the concrete flooring. Dazzling-white light from mercury-vapor floodlamps oozed out the ever-widening fissure in the mighty portal, enveloping Justin and Chris in a tsunami of light and shadow. Justin inched the ATV inside and the doors crawled shut again.

They dismounted and Justin chained his vehicle to a nearby grounding busbar.

"I think I need to use the toilette soon. Do we need to let someone know before we go so they can take over our work until we get back?"

"No, just go." Justin said. "And when you walk around alone, don't act all new and shit. Be neutral and invisible if you can. Just go about your business like you don't really care about anyone else. Don't take too kindly to just anybody, either. I'm still not sure how you didn't become someone's bitch-errand-boy when you first got here."

Justin turned from Chris and led the way inside.

Wasting almost no space, the entryway soon gave way to columns of parallel conveyor belts, an army of workers manning them. The belts shot up from darkness of the depths below, bringing up fresh workloads, and carried on until the end of the sub-complex, until they went right back underground again at the far end, and beyond. Past the rows of assembly lines was a string of small rooms with opaque, one-way windows. The break rooms, Chris gathered. It reminded him of Ma & Pa strip malls on Earth. He tried to forget about all the comforts of home that he left behind, knowing they were staying that way. For now, he kept walking on Justin's lead, listening in as best he could amid the bustling goings on of the factory floor.

Justin pointed around, "So you probably went to work last night wondering the same thing you're wondering now. You asked, and someone showed you how to sort out a bunch of metal scraps on a never-ending conveyor, right? Well, I can already tell what was going through your head at this point. You were trying to look composed, hoping you wouldn't feel like an ass on your first day of work. You were nervous and fidgety, probably like the first time you were with a girl. You've been with a girl, right?"

"Once."

"How far'd ya go? Don't answer that." Justin halted and leaned his weight against the frame of a conveyor, facing Chris with a sudden fatigue in his eyes. "Traxus Nine's only commodity is cargo containers. It is also the only freight hub on the Settlement

Line."

"Settlement Line?"

"The line running transverse through the Orion Arm that divides inner colonies and outer colonies. Now Traxus Nine's existence, while ugly and incomprehensible to you right now, is sort of a necessary evil. We're the only reason the UNSC got as far as the outer colonies in the first place."

Chris studied his surroundings, the whirling of the motors driving the belts and the workers droning on with their various duties. "Such a prosperous industry. Why all the crime?"

"It was only a matter of time before the black market traders figured out that all their traffic to and from the outer colonies would eventually route through this place. They flocked. Almost as fast as THI setup shop, so did the criminal enterprise. And if you're gonna have black marketeers, why not have the drug dealers and human traffickers tag along for the ride as well? They always do. This place became a septic tank overnight."

"So the company doesn't care what Traxus Nine became? As long as their business profits?"

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

"That's horrible."

"Cry me a river, kid. Understand now that there's people out there with no conscience and not a care about your well-being. Hell, they got no compunction for just about everything else in life."

"Can you not use so many big words? I'm only sixteen, you know."

"What I meant to say, kid, was that there are all types of people everywhere you go. Some look nice, some look not nice. And there are some that look nice but aren't, and vice versa."

"I think I know what you're trying to say, but your choice of words is confusing."

"Aw, damnit. Kid, you got me trying to come down to your level and you messed me all up."

"Sorry. I know what you meant, though. No worries. We're on the same page."

"So, where were we? Right, now you've got basically two types of people here. Good guys; bad guys."

"That's simple."

"Well, the lines here on Traxus Nine have blurred somewhat. I'm what you would call a good guy, but sometimes I do bad things."

"Like drink and smoke and swear."

"Thanks for the update, shit head."

Chris sulked at Justin's insult, asked lowly, "And the bad guys?"

"Hey! Toughen up a bit. Don't let words get you down. You've got bigger things to worry about here."

Chris nodded.

Justin looked up and leveled his sight to the farthest conveyor, perhaps beyond as his eyes lost focus. "The bad guys are mainly the war lords and the people that live near them. In the beginning, this place wasn't all that bad when the crooked folk first arrived here. But people got greedy, took too much. Monopolies formed. People got jealous, producing rivalries and then after enough time went by...all-out war."

"A war?" Chris exclaimed with excitement flooding his eyes. "Did you fight in it?"

"I was a Marine _before _I came here, dumbass, pay attention. Heyâ€|you didn't let that last zinger get to you. You _are _a fast learner. You keep this up and you'll be setting yourself up for success!"

Chris beamed up at Justin with a smile.

"So there was this war between rival bands of criminals, got real ugly real quick. At first it was simply over territory and material things, like the contraband flowing in and out of this place. But the panic that spread destabilized region by region until the whole planet was under anarchy."

"Where were you?"

"I was far from it all. I weathered the storm."

"And Pete, Bill, and Ken?"

"With me."

"So what happened when the whole place went crazy?"

"About the worst thing you can imagine. The factories shut down, overrun by murderers and rapists and cracked-out junkies. It was a worldwide killing spree gone fucking bonkers. And that's when the New Model Army stepped in."

"Who were they?"

"It's a store-bought assault force owned by the THI. Bunch of mercenaries and civilian contractors and those types. For whatever reason, they left the service and fought just people instead of the Covenant."

"That's crazy."

"Fuckin' Aye right it is." Justin said, sparking up a cigarette. "The assault force came down to Traxus Nine along with the hand of God. They killed anyone they saw outside, no discriminations. They didn't

care who it wasâ€”Men, women, childrenâ€”didn't matter. Everyone not indoors was targeted with military precision and exterminated like fuckin' Dakrats. Once the people of Traxus Nine found out how serious it had gotten, they settled down fuckin' rickety-tick. The New Model Army had complete order over the planet. There was still violence and everything after the fact, it was just more concealed than normal. I'm talking covert hits ordered by the warlords out there, house-to-house executions, fuckin' genocide shit. Lotta people gone for no good reason." Justin took a drag of the cigarette so heavy that the sheer volume of smoke would bog down a vacuum cleaner. He exhaled through the words: "Then, the NMA declared martial law and laid down the ultimatum: anyone out after curfew would be shot on sight, no questions asked." The smoke from Justin's lungs expelled completely and he took another drag. "So, finally, there was no more killing and the NMA packed up and left. The whole ordeal changed the face of modern warfare. Too bad their campaign will never get published into military history."

"Ugh. You have a sick sense of humor."

"I wasn't trying to be funny."

"So the NMA just left? After all the killing? After all their hard work? What happened after they left?"

"Hard work, eh kid? I like the way you think. Yes, they took off. But they left leaflets behind everywhere basically outlining a deal. Their systematic killing rampage was just to get the people's attention. The deal was either end the violence and start production again or starve to death."

"They threatened to cut off supplies?"

"Made everyone resolve their differences real quick. Now, here we are."

"So then THI won't let anyone leave because the word would get out."

"Yes. They'd blow up any unregistered vessel that tried to make escape velocity. The secret stays here, my friend. Life sentence."

"Holy shit! That is the most vile and despicable story I've ever heard! Tell me you're fucking with me!"

"Hey, that's your first curse word, kid. We're celebrating tonight. And yes, sadly, it's all true." Justin couldn't help but let a morsel of emotion slip by his barrier for the kid. "But hey," he said, placing a hand on his shoulder, "on the bright side, you missed it all. Be thankful for that much."

Chris shook his head in disbelief, still trying to accept Justin's history lesson at his word. "I don't feel like working. I'm sorry."

"Fuck. Well, just snoop around the place a bit. There's things to do here."

"I don't feel like getting high, either."

"Alright." Justin looked around impatiently. "How about games? You like games?"

"Video games?"

"Yeah. They're a bit old, though."

"How old?"

"Ever heard of a game called Marathon?"

"Oh my God, that is ancient! I'm not playing that."

"Yeah, fine. Like I said before, everything you need is here. There's showers, all-you-can-stomach food, pool tables, weight rooms, you can even crash in a bunk while I finish out my shift. No big deal. I'll come and find you when it's time to leave. Cool?"

"Cool."

Chris walked off. "Oh, hey!" Justin shouted, stopping Chris in his tracks.

"Yeah?"

"Don't leave this building. You can get into trouble. Out there is no place for a kid."

"Okay."

"And if you do decide to get lit up, don't punch in the clock and work the line. Supervisors don't like employees getting loaded before shift. Heavy machinery and occupational hazards and stuff."

"I'm just gonna go find a bed."

6. That Concludes the Twenty Five Cent Tour

__**...And That Concludes the Twenty-Five Cent Tour**__

Justin combed one of the many bunk rooms in City 17.

It was a long corridor he walked through, many doors stemming off either side. Each room housed two bunks.

They offered temporary living quarters should people need rest before or after a shift. Their usage was restricted to 28-hour time limits, the same duration of Traxus IX's rotational period. Access logs to the bunks were kept in digital storage for 1-month intervals so as to prevent non-residents from hogging more than their fair share. This way, everyone could have a place to sleep from time to time. If not for the time constraints, fights would ensue over this turf; most people would rather live inside the fortress-city than out. But Justin liked his metal igloo. It was indeed far away and it lacked the comforts of City 17, but it made up for it in basic freedoms and privacy. Plus, he liked the company he had at the igloo. And you couldn't get loaded at work.

He eventually found Chris sleeping chest down in one of the bottom bunks. The satin-blue covers were smoothly draped over his body, reaching the base of his neck so only the side of his face showedâ€”so peaceful. "How do you do it, kid?"

Chris was adjusting extraordinarily well to Traxus IX.

But then again, he didn't have to endure the trials and tribulations that Justin had. Justin remembered his first days here. They were no picnic. He witnessed the worst events to befall Traxus IX, and obviously lived through each one of them. Even had willpower to spare, taking in Bill, Pete and Ken. And now Chris. He might very well have been the only reason they were still alive to this day.

Justin softly said, "Time to go." as he nudged Chris on the shoulder.

Chris' heavy lids opened slowlyâ€”revealing twin, young eyes. They were solid brown and kind, with no assumptions scribed in them.

Justin saw right down into his soul and thought, You shouldn't be here.

But he was.

Justin watched as Chris took his first full breath in possibly fourteen hours. "C'mon, kid. Shift's up. Time to go home."

Chris nodded and rolled the covers back, then slowly rose out of the dainty impression he left in the mattress.

Justin led the way back to the main assembly floor and stopped just short of its entrance from the bunk room. "If you need to go to the bathroom, score some food, or whatever, do it now. Once we get back home that's it. No more amenities until you come back for your next shift." Chris just shrugged his well-rested shoulders. "Good then? Okay, follow me. I have to run some last-minute errands before we leave. It'll be really quick."

"What do you have to do?"

"Gotta run by Admin and get some supplies for the igloo. C'mon."

Justin walked past the rows of assembly lines. Teams of workers feverishly manned the line as they always did, dressed head-to-toe in the workman's ensemble: blue coveralls or neoprene acid aprons, steel-toed boots and latex gloves. The main concern here was sorting out metal components on a waist-high conveyor. They all paid little mind to Justin and the newly-arrived Chris in tow.

Justin reached the main bay door and unlocked the Mongoose's chain with a brass key, quickly stowing the gear atop the front-mounted cargo rack. He donned his thick parka and hopped on board the poly-vinyl chloride leather seat, choking the fuel delivery system as he always did in the eternal winter of Traxus IX. He gave the ignition key a twist and the 1000cc, liquid-cooled hydrogen-injected power plant snarled to life like an angry mountain cat just before

settling into a lopey, soprano purr. He let go of the choke, let go of the brake and placed the transmission into drive. The bay doors procedurally opened for them, revealing the late evening. Cold, brisk troughs of super-cooled air lapped at their faces and whisked inwards before Justin zoomed out into the night.

The inner sanctum of City 17 was decently lit, pure white iridescence spreading evenly by way of mercury-vapor lamps mounted high on metal shafts all around the periphery of the courtyard. Justin aimed the nose of the Mongoose perfectly across the diamond towards the other sub-complex directly opposite of theirs, the Gemini twin factory. Against the wall just north-east of its main bay door was a spigot. Stenciled above it in bold red was HYDROGEN FUEL. That was one of Justin's errands. He parked the ATV right next to it. "If you're thinking about smokingâ€¦|_don't_."

He reached into his pocket, fishing out an elastic cord with a wrist strap attached. He wrapped the strap around his left wrist and plugged in a straight-tipped connector at the other end into a receptacle in the wall, letting the remaining slack of the cable dangle to the ground.

"What's that?" Chris asked dismounting the ATV and leaning against it.

"A grounding strap. It grounds me to something with a lot of conductive metal. In this case, it's the factory building. It prevents static electricity from flowing through me and arcing anywhere near the fuel. Always do this, or boom. This Hydrogen is not pure. It's got other compounds in it for preservation in storage. It's pyrophoric, flammable at room temperature and pressure. So, don't even think about tinkering with my Mongoose. The fuel gets compressed to ten-thousand psi inside it, which means this ATV is a bomb with four wheels and a seat."

"Got it."

Justin reached for the wall where a twist lock lay half-sunken into the stone. He gave it a quarter-turn and swung it open, revealing a cubby-hole. From inside it, he retrieved a neatly-folded hose. He took the collared end of it and screwed it on tight to the threaded spigot, left the nozzle end suspended just inside the lip of the Mongoose's fuel tank. He then tossed the ATV's fuel cap to Chris who was easily ready for it, snatching it out of the air.

"You slept well, huh?"

"Actually, yeah. I feel good."

"Good going. Always grab sleep when you can. Food too. You'll see."

Justin twisted the spigot counterclockwise and the hydrogen flowed, the steel-braided hose on the ground gently snaking this way and that from the steady expansion. The sound of running liquid pinged from the inside of the Mongoose's metal fuel bladder with no particular scent emanating. Chris just stared off into space while basking in the ambient radiance from high above. "Hey," Justin said, grabbing his attention, "wanna go inside and get some kerosene for the heater?"

"Sure. Where is it?"

"Just inside the bay, at the far wall when you walk in. It's a bright-red handle, can't miss it."

"Okay."

Chris walked over to the huge door and it rightly parted for him as he neared. He was momentarily bathed in even whiter light before walking through. Moments later, he emerged with a red jug full of heater fuel. "Want this on the front rack?"

"Yeah. Make sure the lid is snug on there and then lash it down tight to the vehicle."

"Okay."

He did so. Justin finished topping off the tank and they were soon off once again.

It was a pleasant glow they drove through, as if they were up for a game of the ancient baseball—so old that it was still only played on Earth. These days, it was graveball that was all the rage. The ATV carried them through their well-lit diamond field of concrete. Chris pictured a well-groomed grass turf, the compacted dirt, and the heavy white bases. He scanned the deck as they traversed over it—no plant life, just flat concrete. Not even the lone weed sprouting up between the epoxy expansion joints. Chris snapped out of his daydream and perked up. "Are there any plants or animals on Traxus Nine?"

"Maybe the occasional weed here or there or something, but naw...nothing."

Chris slouched back down again, hanging loosely on the rear handle.

"There's no water here to support it anyways." Justin added. "Actually, there is, but in only one place."

"Where? Is it nice, like an oasis?"

"Mmmmm, not really. You may get to see one day. We'll see."

Chris breathed deep as they drove across the wide square. Absolutely no scenery, no beauty to behold on Traxus IX. At least the mercury-vapor glow somewhat resembled a moonlight. But just like anything, the radiance of the moment wouldn't last forever. They had to go. _Justin_ wanted to go. That meant Chris had to go.

The Mongoose dove into the mouth of the tunnel, disappearing into the yawning darkness.

After the darkest part of their passage they reached the friendly side of the mighty, titanium gate. The lone guard on their side promptly cued the doors open, and the two riders left the inner sanctum of the city.

Chris tapped Justin on the shoulder.

"What?"

"Are those guards back there NMA?"

"No, that's just THI's private security guards. They're sub-contracted out from a security firm. The NMA doesn't really exist to the rest of the universe. They were assembled for the purposes of locking down colonies. A specialized, planetary riot control force, if you wanna call it that. Only people that'll ever know about them are the people here."

Up the next ramp they sped, until they emerged on the other side of the city—the outer sanctum where the Admin courtyard loomed. Justin swerved the ATV to face one of the office buildings and stopped it just short of the door. "Wait here and watch it for me while I go in. If you see anyone come towards you—I don't care who it is—you make ready to bolt home. If they get in your way, run 'em over, do whatever you gotta do, just get away and get home. You can't trust no one out here."

"What about you?"

"Don' worry about me, either."

"How will you get home?"

"I can hold my own out here, kid. Trust me, been doin' it for years."

Chris nodded.

"If they don't look friendly, then leave. If they _do _look friendly—just be prepared to jet all the same. This here ATV is a whole liter of ass-kicking displacement. Whatever you do—hold on tight!"

Justin opened the door to the building and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

With that, Chris took stock of his surroundings—as any sensible being would. The outer courtyard was half as wide as the inner courtyard. And half as clear.

Tall office buildings loomed all around the area like tombstones for titans, significantly cutting down his vantage point to outside the city. It was nighttime, and worse: the clouds had dropped a few meters to not even a stone's throw above his sixteen year-old head. Justin's sound guidance earlier was easier to envisage before Chris had looked around and was met with such a grim scene. You could find more cheer in a graveyard. In fact, Chris couldn't even see the road home from here, or even the fateful fork in the road. He took a deep breath to steady himself as best he could, realizing that visibility wasn't _that _bad. He still had an amicable amount of distance to see any oncoming threat and have the time to assess and react to it. How long was Justin going to be?

He studied the building Justin entered: reinforced concrete by the looks of it. Plate glass windows with every drape drawn closed—and why? Rain gutters along the corners of the building, leading into metal grates near the foundation. And the door was a dark, grainy

woodâ€”probably English Oak. The higher ups in life always had the spoils to remind them of their authority over the blue collar folk. And Chris didn't mind. He had intentions all along in life to be a worker and a fighter. A Marine.

No sooner had he again realized that his dream of enlisting was stone-cold dead, he turned from the face of the building and saw the displeasing sight of two large figures emerging from the solid wall of fog at the edge of the city. Two men in thick, raggedy parkas. Chris choked the throttle and started her up. They were only a hundred or so paces away and he'd have precious seconds to move if they were trouble. He released the E-brake and switched the lights on as he repositioned the ATV to face the two unknowns. They were well-lit. Chris had a full tank of fuel and over 900 pounds of unyielding weight between him and the Mongoose. This renewed his confidence.

To further mix things up for the two men ahead, Chris found the horn switch and jabbed it repeatedly, filling the air with an alto _beep-beep!_

The two exposed men froze like statues.

Chris smiled.

Then the two men looked at each other and bolted right towards him. Chris picked up his feet off the ground and placed them firmly onto the side pegs, feeling his heart flutter while mashing the throttle lever with his thumb all the way home. He lurched forward, the four-stroke engine having no problems carrying the two of them on a five-meter-per-second blast straight into the assailants.

The nobby tires bit and crunched into the dirt and the liquid-cooled engine crescendoed upwards in its powerband with delight, joyous notes screaming out the exhaust. Chris fought the overwhelming inertia and pulled in tight to the handle bars, locking his thrill ride on a straight course bearing right through them. In no time, he was right upon them. They tried to clothesline him off the seat, but his sixteen year-old reaction time beat them to the punch. He ducked behind the handle bars as he whipped by them, quickly disappearing into the fog barrier. It was over sooner than it began, the whine of the Mongoose's engine settling down into a steadiness before its resonance faded away for good.

The door to one of the nearby office buildings suddenly flew open, a slice of light spilling around Justin's figure. He emerged from the entryway with a small, cardboard box and immediately scanned for Chris. He quickly fixed his sights on two men in the distance and dropped his belongings to the dirt with complete disregard.

He joined his hands together and cracked his knuckles. With a stiff finger, he pointed right at them.

The two men looked at each other. In silent agreement they decided to exploit their favorable odds and take on Justin Reid. They stepped forth.

As did Justin.

As he strode closer to them, they sized him up, as did he. One of the

men was gargantuanâ€”a real powerhouse. Parkas were thick winter jackets, heavily insulated. And this fellow's muscles were bulging right through it, and who knew how many other layers of clothing beneath. The man was probably pumped up on all manner of anabolics and overdosed amino acids. Taking him out would require some strategy. Maybe some luck.

The other was an older man, average in size all around, but exuded an obvious limp in his gait. He didn't even try to hide it, which told Justin it was a particularly debilitating hindrance. Thankfully, an advantage in his favor butâ€”

There were two of them. Two minds and bodies against one. Their combined actions could outthink him and overpower him. He needed more than just his military training. He had to find a way to take them both out and _fast_. The longer a fight lasted, the more complicated it always became. Justin already had enough complications at the moment.

But maybe the answer was in the men themselves. Every man had a weakness. Justin just had to find them. Before they could kill him.

He slowed his pace to allow more time in studying his adversaries as they drew nearer. Mr. Universe had an unstable look in his eyes. Justin stored that in memory. The other obviously had the gimp but Justin could now make out an eye patch, which was a Godsend. The man had no depth perception and no peripheral vision to his left. Taking care of him would be easy and it would allow Justin to focus more on the behemoth by his side. Maybe Justin would put out his other eye for him while he was at it.

As they were within spitting distance, the thugs looked hesitant to strikeâ€”perhaps an uncertainty in their poise. They nevertheless pressed on. Justin knew what they were thinking: two against one. But when they drew within striking distance, Justin dashed forth in a blur of motion and a wicked sting in his eyes, the sheer malice on his face catching one man off guard. Just as Justin thought: the big man was so pumped up on chemicals, it rendered him unstable. With just enough hesitation, he was put down to the ground with a decisive flying kick to the Adam's apple. As Justin flew over the more deadly of his opponents, he turned to his next as quickly as he landed. The crippled man surprisingly held his ground despite Justin's amazing move, inching ever backwards as Justin inched closer. Justin smiled as the thug quivered. "Not so easy when you're facing a man, is it?"

The cripple didn't answer.

Justin thought about ending it right here and beating the man to a pulp, but before he could act, the lone thug jockeyed his head to the side with a newfound smile on his face. Justin followed the cripple's gaze: the big man lying on the dirt behind Justin wasn't out for the count yet. He rose out of an impression that his large frame made in the ground, and leveled his gaze at Justin with an uncontrollable rage. Unbelievable that he was still alive after that death blow to the windpipe. Then again, this was a man who weight-trained for this very reason: to win fights-and probably to the death. It was entirely probable that he never had a real meal in yearsâ€”all pills and steroid injections.

So before tangoing with this brute of a man, Justin turned and lashed out with a straight palm strike to the elder's solar plexus, leaving him gasping for air on his knees. Without thinking, the other man charged Justin.

The immense muscle mass of this ogre propelled him towards Justin at startling speed, and there was no escaping him. Justin didn't have the agility necessary to avoid the giant bearing down on him, not after the hard strike he delivered to his other opponent. There was only one possible solution to this new problem: to use his own weight against him.

Justin's long-lost training kicked in.

The man was deathly close when Justin did the last thing anyone would expect: he let the man tower over him and take him down to the ground in a bear hug. Justin acted quickly. For if he let this brute take him all the way to the ground, it was over; he would just sit on top of Justin and he could do whatever he wanted with all that weight and power. He could swing away at Justin's face until there was nothing left of it. But with surprising agility, Justin pulled himself up over the man's torso and managed to get one leg wrapped around his neck before the fall.

Justin regained his bearings. He was on the ground, side by side with his attacker. He had a hamstring over the giant man's neck. He propped himself upright for more leverage and wrapped it all the way around the circumference. Before the man even realized what sort of position he was in, Justin squeezed. Squeezed with all his might.

Justin caught a fleeting instant of eye contact with his assailant. He was fueled by rage and the will to survive as the air was being deprived to him. It was either the lack of oxygen that caused the eyes to expand or an exponential swell in rage, but Justin couldn't tell. All Justin knew was that for the first time in a long time, he felt fear and regret when he looked in those eyes. Justin tried to match the man's vigor, but knew he was waning. All Justin could do was squeeze his hamstring, so much so that he could feel his muscle starting to strain and turn lame. The man's neck was like a tree trunk and it felt like Justin was making very little difference.

Justin risked a quick glance over his shoulder at the crippled man: he was still doubled over and wheezing and no threat just yet.

He focused back to the bigger threatâ€”The man that Justin had beneath him in an improvised Head Scissor was turning beat red, all the veins in his head swellingâ€”almost out of the skin. Finally, there was visual progress to indicate he had the advantage. Justin's goal was to break the man's neck, a quick and merciless death. Failing that, suffocation.

But even down to his last, the man showed just how much strength he possessed and grabbed Justin by one of his wrists, yanking his leg off of his neck and throwing his whole body to the side. Justin landed a clean two meters away, crumpling to the ground as the man slowly regained his breath and his bearings. Not even five seconds later, the giant was back on his feet.

Now, Justin was back to square one.

The elder had recovered and so did the brute.

But Justin had given them a run for their money. They stood in shock, panting and hurting. Justin hadn't even sustained a scratch yet.

It would seem that pure rage renewed their resolve. And this was the point where fights got complicatedâ€”exactly what Justin tried to avoid in the first place. He failed at this somehow. The bigger one should've been dead by now from the sheer amount of trauma Justin delivered to his upper spinal cord, not to mention, the flying kick to the Adam's apple should have cut off his air. Things were taking a turn for the worse. They now knew his speed. They knew his strength and his capabilities. They could adapt and make it all the more complicated.

On the plus side, he had winded them greatlyâ€”and they were surely shaken. Doubt, he instilled in them. And most of the fight was upstairs. He needed to find more advantages to exploit; they were greater numbers and that beast of a man had sustained incredible damage. Justin considered his best option so far.

He could run into the fog, play guerilla games with them. Covertly strike them again and again until they were a liability to themselves and walk away from it all. That is, if they were brave and stupid enough to follow him.

But just then, the high-pitched whine of a certain all-terrain vehicle resounded through the dense fog and off the Admin buildings, filling the gloom of the courtyard.

Piercing through the mist was the headlamp of Justin's Mongoose. Chris had come back.

The ATV parted the last line of fog and swerved to a halt next to Justin.

"C'mon, Justin. Get on!"

Cunningly, with his eyes ever glued on the two thugs, Justin took the driver's seat while Chris jockeyed for pillion. The two assailants did not make a move, perhaps considering their luck at this point. Before he drove off, Justin remained for just a few heartbeats and glared into the men, particularly the big one. Justin pointed dead at him before heading into the mist.

Justin aligned the nose of the Mongoose with an unwavering crest of hard clay just under the dirt. Visibility was near zero and the headlamps only lit up this lineâ€”which was a natural arrangement in the crust of Traxus IX. As the road to the city ended, this line was all that ever remained and it would get them home despite the fact that they were flying blind. All he had to do was keep it in between the tires and everything would right itself.

Chris breathed explosively. "Man, that was crazy. I was sure that big guy had it in for us."

"Coming back for me was stupid," Justin said. "I told you not to

worry about me. I told you to just get home!"

"Sorry. I couldn't just sit around with you out there."

"Kid, I gotta hard enough time without having your death on my fuckin' conscience. When I tell you to do something, you do it!"

"Hey, I'm my own man. I chose to come back for you so you wouldn't get killed! If I didn't, that big guy would've messed you up! So noâ€¦you _don't _tell me what to do!"

"You live in my house, you drive my rideâ€¦"_I_ tell you what you fucking can, and cannot do!"

As every other ride they shared on the Mongoose, the rest of the journey went on in silence, until they finally reached home.

Justin dismounted and brushed off the dirt from himself, chained and locked his ATV to one of the steel containers and got his things off the cargo rack, scowling as he remembered leaving the other supplies outside the Admin office where the fight took place. "Fuck it." he thought aloud.

"What?" Chris said, opening the igloo's atrium door.

"Nothing," Justin said as he brushed by Chris and into his home, "your twenty-five cent tour is over."

"What now?" Chris asked skittering into the igloo behind Justin.

"Sleep."

7. Follow the Sun Down

**Follow the Sun Down**

Lightâ€¦it reached Chris' eyes.

Morning came.

He awoke to the sight of a cold and grey nothing-sky canvass that peered through the seam of the atrium door. The miasma that dominated their ride home last night was gone. The cloud layer had ascended since then, greatly. He perked his head up.

"It's light outside." someone said from across the room.

Chris turned his head to find Justin watching him. Chris arose from the corner of the atrium room and stretched, then walked a short distance closer to him.

He was reading some sort of colorful text, the cover of the material looking more cartoonish than informative.

"Who _were _those guys last night?"

"If I were to guess, and I'm a pretty good guesser, I'd say they were

Bolshevik members, the most powerful faction under the most powerful warlord here."

"What did they want with me? For what reason would they attack a kid?"

"No other reason than you being an easy target."

"Is it really like that all over the world?"

Yes. You're in the eye of a silent storm, Chris. This whole planet is red."

"I don't know what you mean, red."

"Red. Civil war, revolutionary times, bloodshed. It's red. Right?"

Chris nodded.

"Hey, next time you get back to the city, you ought to wash your clothes. You stink."

Chris raised his arm and took a whiff, involuntarily rearing back in surprise at his own stench. "Well, I didn't bring anything with me. Where can I go to buy clothes here?"

"Ha. Nothing's for sale here, kid. Just dope and booze. Factory will give you some work clothes to change into, but that's it. You'll have to get your hands dirty if you want anything for yourself."

"Guess I'll try and do that today."

"No, not today."

"Why not today?"

"Today's a holiday." Justin got up, casually tossed his reading material down on the floor and opened a steel door to an adjoining container and disappeared thereafter as it shut.

"_Holiday?_" Chris mumbled.

He looked where Justin was a moment ago, saw the book and cocked his head quizzically to the side. He walked over to it and scooped it up off the dirt floor, looking at its cover: SPIDERMAN.

"Spiderman. What the Hell is Spiderman?"

"It's a comic book!" some muffled voice rang from one metal container to the next.

"Ohâ€¦thanks!"

That left Chris alone in the atrium. Despite a light aching from sleeping on such hard contours, he had received an ample amount of sleep. He felt at peace and sighed contently, now looking around for something to occupy his mind with. It was then that he noticed a familiar object wedged between the bottom cushions of the nearby couch. He walked over to it, pulled it upward and nodded to himself.

"A photo frame."

Chris glanced about, made sure he was still alone.

The device was worn. It was old and hadn't looked like it was used in quite some time, forgotten beneath the cushions. As if memories were frivolous.

Likely so, Chris thought.

Nevertheless, Chris' curiosity now reigned his morning.

He ran his sights over the chassis and searched for the power button. First, he had to wipe his hand across all surfaces in order to accurately see anything, it had been neglected so long. Chris began to wonder if the battery was still holding a charge. It likely siphoned off static electricity from the air when not actually plugged into a power source in its dormant state, and the q-bit memory inside would long outlast anything around it.

"There you are." Chris said as he jabbed once at the button.

There was hesitation, then the device's screen flickered on with white light. A diagnostic test began to scroll by and by the brief look of it, the electronics ran through their routine POST. After a few seconds, a GUI loaded and provided Chris with a simple menu. He went straight for the archive...

He began to scroll through.

It was Justin in Uniform. United Earth Space Corps standard issue fatigues. He was surrounded by a small number of fellow Marines in a group pose. In the background he swore he saw the faces of Pete, Bill and Ken. They all looked so happy. Justin looked happy, on top of the world, in control. His hair was within regs, which made him almost barely recognizable, like he was a different person with that haircut. He really was a different person to Chris. The eyes had a sparkle to them and the crow's feet flanking them signaled happiness in that moment.

Chris scrolled through to the same shot, but this time a wider angle. Around the small unit of Marines was the panorama of City 17. Chris could make out the admin district off to one side.

Chris paid particular attention to Justin. He had surely changed since these photos were taken. His physical form had declined. The muscle tone was lesser and surely the skin was now pale, and the look of happiness was gone.

He scrolled through, gaining more insight into a life long forgotten by some.

There were photos of a dining facility inside the factory complex, the Marines sharing a meal. They had two tables to themselves. The cafeteria was bustling with workers. Some were seated at tables on their lunch breaks. Though the image was a still frame, it was clear that people back then moved with purpose and a sense of diligence. They were happy, productive, hopeful.

"Put that back where you found it."

Chris jerked his head in the direction of Justin's voice and quickly set the frame down on the couch.

Justin's voice was perfectly calm, yet his form in the doorway was motionless, just like those photos.

"Sorry." Chris said.

Justin shrugged his shoulders. It would seem Chris hadn't crossed a hard line with his snooping, though the boy caught a clamping of Justin's jaw as he turned away.

Chris watched the former Marine go further into the igloo. He waited a moment, then opened the same door that Justin had and found himself in a wide junction of sorts. Off the atrium was this room: all steel on all sides, a cube of metal with a door at each wall. The floor was clean with no traces of dirt and fluorescent lamps hung from the ceiling by parachute cord. Their electrical wires snaked to one wall, slithering down through the far door and beyond. Justin was nowhere to be seen, probably behind another door, but Pete was there—resting peacefully on a cot with one hand tucked behind his head, staring thoughtfully at the ceiling. He just kept staring. It was going on two whole minutes since Chris entered the room. Finally, Chris said:

"Hello?"

Pete rolled his head over in Chris' direction, held it there for a moment and smiled. "Hi. You're—the new kid, right?"

"Yeah, I think we met the other night. Pete, right?"

"Barker."

"Your name is Barker. My mistake."

"No, no. Pete Barker. Barker's my last name."

"Nice to meet you Pete. My name is Chris."

"Likewise, I'm sure." he said with a careless smile.

Chris sat down and rested his back against the cold steel wall and looked to Pete. "How long have you been awake?"

"'Bout two hours." Pete said, practically holding more conversation with the low ceiling than anything other.

Chris smiled. "So are you going to get up soon?"

Pete slowly took his gaze off the ceiling again like it was a chore to do so, like his joints were made of molasses, and looked back to Chris again, saying, "—Maybe."

Chris grew impatient. The need was growing on him to keep occupied after waking, like the day was wasting by the second. He always had been a fast riser, an early bird. He had supported himself most of his life and wasn't a slouch in the least. "Maybe?"

"No need to get up, really." Pete said lazily. "It's a holiday today. Factories everywhere shut, down for the day. But," Pete said with a tone that seemed to reach Chris' thoughts, "you can go in when they open for night shift."

"Why do the factories close? I thought they liked to keep busy."

"â€|Maybe it's best if Justin tells you that one. He's the know-it-all around here. The only thing I'll say in the matter is: _everyone_ needs a holiday. Even criminals."

Chris huffed and stood up. "Okay."

"Well, wait! Don't _leave_. Tell me a little about yourself, why you're here, _how_ you got here."

"Not much to tell, really."

"Aw, c'mon," Pete begged, "every survivor's got a story."

"I guarantee it's not as interesting as yours, or Justin's."

"That don't matter. I _like_ _hearing_ stories from the outside."

"Wellâ€" "

Before Chris could even mutter one word, a door hinged open from another room. It was Justin stepping out, and his best friend Bill Santhouse in tow. At first, nothing was said. Not even a hello. Justin paid no mind to either Chris or Pete, just tried to make his way to the atrium and probably further on by the way he currently carried himself. And through the open door, Justin's gaze hung. His eyes widened in delight. "Sun shower!"

Like a light switch, everyone changed their demeanor and bolted for the outside. Even Pete jumped up out of his cot like he'd just been struck by lightning.

Chris hurriedly followed the three of them out the dirt-covered atrium like a fawn following its mother in a stampede, and was eventually met with a face full of bright sunshine.

He paused just outside the front door and watched Justin. He stood tall with eyes closed and arms stretched out wide, smiling from ear to ear. The look on his face was so incongruent to all the actions he'd displayed so far, but Chris couldn't possibly think for an instant that he'd known everything about Justin just yetâ€"only a day or so since arriving at Traxus IX. And Pete just stood lazily, leaning up against the atrium hull, lighting a cigarette and basking in the ambiance. Bill stood in the open dirt turf, straight and still as a statue, head tipped down and hands bound together in prayer. The cool winds ran like invisible fingers through his dark, wavy hair.

Their behavior was so strange to Chris.

But he remembered them saying that sunshine was a rarity. He didn't

really understand their joy, didn't see what the big deal was, but nevertheless got the feeling he'd be in for the same experience months from now. So, he put himself in their shoes and pretended to enjoy it with them.

"Hey!" Justin shouted into the air with a smile. "Someone get the frisbee from inside!"

"I'll get it." Chris offered. He ran back to the igloo, turned around short of the door. "Where is it?"

"In the heater room." Justin said. "Go through the door I was in and you can't miss it. It's bright-orange."

"Okay."

Chris walked through the atrium as Ken passed him by. "Hi." Chris greeted.

Ken nodded in reply.

Chris walked into the Atrium, heading straight through the only door at the end. Through it, he wound up in the junction box again, a door to the left, to the right, and straight ahead. He chose straight and walked into a larger steel container with a lone fluorescent light above providing meager luminescence to the large, hollow chamber. All the wires from every light source in the igloo met in this room, to a vehicle battery—probably stolen. Lying in a corner of the floor was a bright-orange disc. He bent down to it and scooped it up, echoes from his footsteps registering in his cognizance as he left. "Kill the lights on your way out!" a faint voice said from outside.

Chris flipped all the switches off as he left, hurrying to get outside for what seemed like a delicacy to them all. He spotted a shotgun leaning up against the inner door frame and it stopped him short. He went to pick it up and check it out, but then thought better of it. He rushed outside.

Bill had finished his prayer. Pete was still enjoying his morning smoke and Justin stood waiting for Chris. "Toss it to me." Justin said.

With a fling of the wrist, the frisbee spun away from Chris' hand and sailed over to Justin with a slight wobble.

"Nice toss." Justin said with a smile. "A little work and you'll be an expert in no time."

"Thanks." Chris replied. "Before I play, is there any water?"

"Pallet full of it around back." Justin tossed the frisbee to Bill.

Chris left for the backside of the all-metal establishment, taking note of its arrangement while he walked to get the water. Justin's igloo was basically five, large steel cargo containers all butted up together in the basic shape of a cross. The seams matched up nicely and obviously the interior doors mated perfectly. Faded paint over every container sported the Traxus Heavy Industries logo: TRAXUS in

heavy, bold print with a miniscule HEAVY INDUSTRIES underneath. Off to the side was a ringed planet. The outer material of the containers was a corrugated metal, probably a basic galvanized steel-alloy. And the outward-facing ends of each container had a mound of clay and dirt shoved up against them, permanently sealing the outer doors from intruders. That meant only one entrance/exit to the place—the atrium.

Chris neared the back. Sure enough, a large, wooden pallet sat there atop a cluster of cinderblocks with dozens of water bottles tightly saran-wrapped together. An olive-drab tarp was draped loosely across to keep out the ubiquitous dust. He walked up and lifted a piece of tarp, clawed at the plastic wrap and snagged two bottles, soon making his way back to the guys. It was then that he noticed a peculiar little piece of roofing material dead center atop the igloo, a sloped roof for a vent hole.

He walked on by, his eyes fixed on the vent as he circumnavigated his way around the igloo and back to the front. He cracked open a bottle with a twist upon taking a seat on the Mongoose, watching Bill, Pete, Justin, and Ken gathering up in a diamond formation throwing the disc back and forth. They threw all manner of trick passes. They were good, obviously afforded much time practicing in their boorish lives.

In perfect harmony they threw to one another Upside-down Scoober Throws, Hammer, and Duck passes—all slicing through the brisk air currents like a hot knife through butter. After a few minutes of this talented display, the frisbee worked its way around to Justin right in time for the wind to die—a moment he'd been waiting for. He reared further back from group with haste, wound up mightily and galloped forth with the frisbee high above his head. Disc tilted at 45°, he over-shouldered it high in the air like a Tomohawk Chop. The frisbee raced to heights that made it momentarily hard to spot, but the bright-orange color was contrasting nicely against the lifeless-grey sky. It glided high above them all, turning upside down in mid-flight. The perfect sun once again found a path through the gloom and lit up the disc like a shining angel about to ascend into the clouds. Updrafts eventually resided and the frisbee eventually rained down to the ground with sudden ferocity as if the breath of the planet decided give out and to let it go. It crashed down upon Ken's position, who easily snatched it from the air. He threw it to Chris. The day was perfect.

"You know what would be awesome right about now?" Justin said as the frisbee lazily circulated amongst the group.

"You read my mind." Bill said.

Without another word, Justin broke formation and ran back into the house, back out a moment later with a clear bag in his hand. He gingerly opened it, placing his nose up to it for a whiff at a sweet scent.

"Is that what I think it is?" Chris asked.

"Only the finest weed in the entire galaxy," Justin said, "for a special occasion. A quarter-ounce of the good stuff."

"Nice." Ken said with overt approval. "I was wondering when you were

gonna bust it out."

"Man," Chris said, breaking the moment, "you guys sure do get excited over this stuff."

Pete gestured towards Chris rather grandly considering his well-known indifference. "Take it from me, you will come to love this shit."

"Matter of factâ€|" Justin said, his voice momentarily trailing off as he rolled a cigar, "â€|today is a special day for more than one reason. Yes the sun is out, yes we're off today, and yes the basic needs are metâ€|but just yesterday Chris here said his first ever curse word."

"Here-here!" Bill shouted.

"Hey, you're learning." Pete said.

"So, let's light up." Justin smiled.

* * *

><p>Some time had gone by in their collective, hazy high.<p>

The day waned into twilight hour, the sun nearly surrendered to night. They had all receded into the igloo. Sitting in the atriumâ€|sharing jokes, discussing at length their flings of romance from a distant past, telling stories of better timesâ€|that was how they passed the time. They ate what little rations were stored in the igloo after their highs came down. It was the most fun any of them had in a long timeâ€|even Chris, who hadn't been relegated to such an existence as they. The boy gauged his surroundings, thought it an opportune moment to vent some of his questions.

"So tell me, guys..." he said with a coy smile on his face. He surveyed them all before bringing up the eventful past of T-09. "â€|Tell me why today is a holiday. You guys friggin' work so hard I would've thought a holiday was the last thing you wanted."

Pete raised his chin at the boy. "Today is a holiday for two and _only_ two reasons. Justin?"

"Don't think it's for the benefit of the common worker," Justin said, "because it's not. Reason one: to get the workers away from the factory. Reason two: is a planet-wide change of command at every city."

Chris leaned forward with rapt interest. "Why on both accounts?" he inquired.

"Every year this day, factory-city administrators swap command positions. They get flown into their new city aboard personal Pelican aircraft. And when this happens, they want the workers out."

"Why do you suppose?"

"No one really knows, but I would guess because their staff need to brief them on the status of the city and its major issues. It's a security concern. The admins like to live a sheltered life. Admins

commingling with the line workers, all in one place at one time, probably isn't in their best interests, you know?"

"So where do the Pelicans come from? I haven't seen one yet."

"No one knows that, either. Some say they're ferried down to the cities on autopilot from the space station high above. Some say they're secretly tucked away under the courtyards of the cities."

"What do you think?"

"Heh, doesn't matter what I think. And I could care less. Makes no difference to me where they stash 'em."

"So they just want us out to give them space...and we get a holiday for it?"

"Pretty much...but most people here on Traxus Nine don't know the full story."

"This is where it gets good." Pete cut in, his eyes widening in excitement like a kid in a candy store. Pete took notice of Chris' onset of confusion. "I told you, Chris, I love hearing stories. Especially this kind of shit."

"So," Justin said, looking back to Chris as if sharing a nighttime horror story, "this event takes place about the same time the New Model Army had come planet-side for a little housecleaning. The most prominent warlord of the time was Kaiser Sergei, a deadly and merciless terrorist of a man. I'm talking worst of the worst. He was among the first to arrive here at E-dayâ€"that's Emigration Dayâ€"when literally millions of criminals and illegal traders and the like swarmed the place, setting up shop to conduct their business. All traffic throughout most of the new frontier came, and still does come through Traxus Nine. They knew it the moment THI's volume skyrocketed. The fact that their stock split seven times in one quarter ensured the migration wouldn't stop, either."

"For years, the Kaiser had control over much of the planet's illegal trade. He got most of the kickbacks and it remained this way until some of his most trusted men got greedy and conspired against him. But the Kaiser was more cunning than a desert jackal and started murdering those who even so much as looked at him funny. Fearing torture or death, those in his clan still plotting against him fled and gathered up strength. Kaiser anticipated a strike on his own soil, so he executed a systematic series of raids on suspected rival hideouts. Sometimes the Kaiser got what he looked for and other times he couldn't find his rivals, so gruesome mass murders of entire towns and villages ensued, just to drive the point that you don't mess with the Kaiser. The point was taken, except some of his adversaries slipped through the cracks. Months and years went by in tranquility under this guy, and then all hell broke loose. The Battle of Gulag Hill. That's what this holiday is really all about, kid."

"Tell me." Chris said, his eyes transfixed on Justin's.

"It was the bloodiest day next to the NMA's invasion. The rivals of the Kaiser had been recruiting immense strength in an underground network for years, mind you. Criminals ambitious for more spoils

and profits, and the misguided and impressionable kids out there just trying to make it. They were all prime selection. Once collected at full strength, they launched assaults on all the Kaiser's territories with calculated precision. There was little to no recovery from such coordinated attacks. And they knew just what to doâ€”some of them having been employed by the Kaiser for years without him knowing it. This global attack was aimed to take down the entire criminal sub-empire and force a regime change. The allies of either side soon joined in, whether forced to or just looking for their stake in the criminal industry once the dust settled. So gang wars inevitably spilled into the streets, into the factories, to the entire planet. It was at Gulag Hill that the most bloodshed occurred.

"It was The Great Water Scare. It was thought that the gangs near Gulag Hill poisoned the water with something, some kind of nerve agent or mind control drug that they obtained from their black market dealings. It drove the townspeople insaneâ€”and _they_ joined in on the rampant killings. Factory staffs at the neighboring city were attacked. Admin buildings were breached and destroyed, and even a mayor was killed. This is the main reason why the NMA came. Remember how I said you don't mess with the company? Well, mayors are company property, right?"

"Right." Chris said hoarsely, swallowing a lump that'd been forming in his throat.

"So, after the NMA came and basically ended it all, they declared martial law and shot down any vessel trying to leave the planet and make for the slipstream. The majority of the NMA then left with only their ultimatum and a small task force behind. To this day, nobody knows what drove the people insane or what was in the water, but from that day forth THI declared an annual armistice. And so, on this day every year, the mayors of each city take up a new location of command and appraise what progress their colleagues have made towards stability, so that an incident like that would never happen again. Kind of like an Inspector General's force-wide review. They check each others' work so there's no bias involved."

"Wow," Chris said, "so they run a pretty tight show. What ever happened to Kaiser Sergei?"

"He switched places with his enemies. He's underground, building up strength. And can you guess where he's doing it?"

"Down the road you told me never to go down?"

"BINGO, kid. You _are_ one intuitive bastard!"

Justin articulated his reply in a manner that Chris still couldn't discern between sincerity or sarcasm.

"Soâ€”why doesn't someone try to contact the UNSC from here? Tell them what's going down at Traxus Nine? Maybe some of us can get a trip outta this Hell-hole."

"Yeah, that won't happen." Pete said almost with a laugh. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but there is no inkling of hope to hold onto in that regard."

"It just seems so wrong that the truth should be hidden. What about

the NMA, Justin?"

"What about them?"

"I mean, they're hired to committ hainous crimes against men, women and children...Wouldn't at least one of them have a conscience and tell about it later on down the road?"

"No."

Chris stared at Justin for a moment. "How can you just say _no_?"

"If any one of those mercs blew the whistle on their own people, do you realize what would happen to them?"

"They'd be hunted down?"

"Ha! You've got a talent for understatement, kid. Those mercs would literally jump at the opportunity to get a reward out of personally fucking over any rat within their organization. And that's just the tip of the iceberg, my friend. They'd also kill their family, assuming they had one, and they'd do it very slowly while they _watched_."

"How does someone find themselves caught up in that kind of world?" Chris shook his head.

"Don't you think you're better off not knowing?"

Chris pursed his lips. "You're probably right."

"Usually am."

"I think of the innocent people like me that wound up here. This shouldn't be their home at all. This shouldn't be _your _home at all. We should all have the freedom to come and go as we choose like any other planet out there!"

"I agree." Justin said, his voice ill-omened from the corner of the room. "One-hundred percent, I do. But it's fairly obvious by now. What's it been guys? Going on ten years?" Every one of Justin's friends nodded their heads in agreement as he looked directly at Chris. "Ten years of steady-state business for THI ought to be some kind of indicator."

"That the UNSC hasn't found out yet?"

"That the UNSC turns the other cheek, man."

Chris hung his head at this revelation. "No...I don't buy that."

"You don't have to, kid. But that's the way the cookie crumbles in the real world."

"Suppose your right. Suppose that the UNSC knows and doesn't do a bloody thing about it. What would happen if the right words were to reach the right ears?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"Like sending out a radio transmission to the nearest colony. Some good Samaritan might receive it and send help, send the cavalry."

"Right." Justin said mockingly. "I can see it now...The radio operator at the distant end receives this communiqué of yours and acts upon it to your personal benefit, assuming you're not already dead by then because it of course takes an awful lot of time for this radio transmission to traverse subspace. So foregoing the impossible here just for shits and grins, we'll say that he receives it and reports it to his superior—who then reports it to their superior, and-on and-on up the chain of command until the highest of the high gets wind of this atrocious act of planetary proportions. Every single soldier, sailor or civilian that had a hand in forwarding up this message, this news of intolerable humanitarian atrocity, is rewarded with high honors and award ceremonies are held in their name, and they are heralded heroes! This is where the elegant part of it all comes in, kid—"

"All those heroes can go home and sleep at night knowing only that they did the right thing. They even see news feeds and Chatter networks bustling with reports of UNSC intervention at Traxus Nine at just the right time, eh? But what they could never possibly fathom in a billion light-years is that general officers high above them know _exactly_ what goes on here and that's where the buck stops. Those generals, those great men leading great men and those politicians by their side _let_ this evil hive continue to fester all because—"

"their mission can go on. They can continue to pioneer the cosmos knowing that we provide them the means to do it so that people more fortunate than us can have a shot at a better life on another world. Some mommy and daddy pair can get junior's Christmas presents shipped to them on time from across the galaxy. Greater good, kid. Makes you feel kinda noble here, doesn't it? Kind of a righteous thing we're doing here, isn't it?"

The igloo was deathly silent. Chris got the feeling the mood of the room had changed. Even the other guys were engrossed on Justin, his words.

Justin was no longer teasing, no longer joking. His eyes held a fire in them and were somewhere else, lost in memory.

"Fuck." Pete said, throwing his last morsel of food to the dirt. "There goes my buzz."

"Oh my God." Chris said, placing his head in his hands. "There really is no escaping—" He trailed off and once again fought back the tears.

Ken looked around imploringly, gesturing for anyone to comfort Chris in some way for he was far too shy to go that far out on a limb for someone.

It was Bill who finally left his place and knelt down next to Chris, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder. He spoke softly, saying to him, "Hey, Chris, at least you'll never be alone again. We know tomorrow

is just a maybe. Doesn't seem so guaranteed. But it seems for once we're finally happy, blessed with everything we need."

"Yeah," Pete said, "you can live a simple life here. Most of the people out there in the real world can't even do _that _for themselves. Swept up in money and possessions, status and bullshit. At least here, we're forced to have our simple ways. Like Bill said...once you get used to it, there's no worries, Chris. No worries at all." Pete offered one empathetic smile towards the kid before going back to reading his comic book. Such compassionate gifts from Pete didn't come very often at all. He was a hard man with thick skin like Justin Reid, who said:

"It's not gonna be long until the city opens back up. I suggest we all go in tonight. We've been cooped up in here all day and we're in need of a change of scenery. All the weed is gone, anyway."

Chris thought about just bursting into tears, but instead looked upon all the faces surrounding him. "Everything I've ever known is gone now. Everyone I ever knew is gone. I have nothing anymore. Will I ever be the same?"

Justin took his eyes off from the floor and glanced at Chris. "Nah, kid, you'll never be the same. We're your new family now." He got up and walked further into the igloo to get ready for the journey to work. "Sorry."

* * *

><p>After changing into thicker clothes, Justin moseyed outside and fired up the Mongoose. The ATV stuttered to life in the cold sunset as the winds of the barren plains surrounding it swept up fine particulate into Dust Devils. Chris emerged from the igloo, then Bill, then Pete and Ken. Everyone was ready and heading in the same direction together.<p>

"How are we all gonna make it?" Chris asked. "Take the ATV back and forth?"

"We'll do no such thing." Pete said with a grin. "Ever go skiing?"

"No. I saw it on TV once."

"Wait 'till you get a load of this."

"What you're about to witness is skiing on crack!" Justin exclaimed.

Pete said no more and ran back inside the igloo, back out in a flash. In his hands were three pairs of parabolic skis, their boot bindings, and a fan-out rope. He wrapped one looped end of the rope around a trailer hitch welded to the back of the Mongoose. The rope stretched out to about seven meters before fanning out into three more lengths—each with thick rubber handholds at their ends.

"No way." Chris said, studying the setup.

"Way." Pete replied, rigging it up.

Bill, Pete, and Ken each donned heavy plastic boots and slipped them into a pair of bindings attached to skis, locking them firmly in place with a series of clicks.

"Get on." Justin said to Chris, who obediently assumed the ever-familiar pillion position.

"You're going to tow them all the way to work?"

"Fuck yeah." Justin shouted.

"Can it handle it?"

"I thought I told you: this is a whole liter of ass-kicking displacement. Watch it go to work, buddy."

Justin mashed the throttle all the way home and pulled himself and everyone else straight into the North-setting sun.

8. Another Day in Paradise

****Another Day in Paradise****

The ride on the Mongoose of that late, sunny afternoon in the tundra-like plains was a welcomed getaway from all the seriousness Chris had been experiencing as a newcomer to Traxus IX, all the repugnant facts and stories he was hearingâ€"and even the harsh landscape that seemed to harbor the abundance of atrocities therein with a twisted sort of fitting hospitality. In fact, everyone's spirits were enlightened by the sheer pleasure of the Mongoose ride alone. Justin customarily drove while Chris rode pillion, his youthful forearm muscles holding on to the ATV with vigor. Pete, Bill, and Ken were dragged along for the ride on their skis, holding onto the ropes tight as they skimmed along the talc-fine sugar sand, swayingâ€"right to left, left to rightâ€"dodging rocks and divots and traversing up and over the stumpy moguls. And the sun was still out, just barely, looking them head-on as it sank to sleep at the afore-summoning horizon. The perfect end to a perfect day.

Chris didn't know that Justin and the rest had been waiting for a day such as this for a great deal of months. Such luck that Chris arrived just in time for this rare and wondrous occasion. Such luck indeed. But he was still nevertheless coping with the prospect of this place, this barren world of villainy, being his new home. The rarity of this day that he could not yet truly appreciate was doing nothing to alleviate his still-aching pain. Anything he ever wished to do in lifeâ€"he would never leave here. He would never know another world ever again. Stuck in a rut that wouldn't see an end, ever deepening and ever widening.

Purgatory.

Chris still couldn't wrap his finger around how he landed himself here. Was he naÃ¯ve?

He ventured to Traxus Nine on a whim, to the one place known to hire anyone looking for work. He desperately needed to support himself with some time to go until he could enlist in the Corps. He took a gamble on someone else's word. When a stowaway on a cargo vessel, he

overheard guards chatting about Traxus IXâ€”how prosperous the company had become because of the booming industry on this one planet. How right they were. And how foolish too. Just like Chris.

But he knew the rest of the world outside of City 17 was a worse fate to be had still. He counted his blessings. Blind luck that he wound up at this exact location. He was grateful that he wound up in relatively good hands, however stern they may be. It wasn't so bad. Justin gave tough love, Chris realized now. Tough love that he may have in fact received if he had avoided this place long enough to enlist in the Marine Corps. Maybe Justin was still a Marine at heart, more so than he denied. But it was wise to not dwell on Justin's own state of affairs. Better to let it go before curiosity got the better of Chris and he started asking more questions that would only land him in trouble, like recently. Something in Justin's past was a thorn in his side, and he didn't like revisiting those memoriesâ€”obviously. Was that why he doped himself up all the time?

To forget?

Chris wondered.

He couldn't tell though, couldn't get past that dragon skin of Justin's. He wasn't a talker, wasn't an emotional person. He had no use for feelings or remorse, except only to describe the horrific events that had transpired in Traxus IX's short but brutal history. And it seemed as though Justin rather admired the planet's unique plight, like he let go of hope so long ago that he was all the more cynical for it. It was all probably the result of him living a structured life and then coming to Traxus IX for some unknown reason, living it out in destitution for the last decade. It would have been a system shock, a total meltdown on everything someone would know. Life, liberty, everything...stripped away. And more than likely, that wasn't the only thing eating at him. People, no matter who they are, usually don't have one problem that defines their struggle in a portion of their life. It's a combination of probelems, a volatile mix that stirs and erodes the person from the inside out. The drug use was no doubt adding to the deterioration of Justin's psyche as well. Chris wanted to know more of Justin, to understand him, to befriend him. Justin wasn't making it easy.

But perhaps Chris didn't have to look outward too much to discern Justin's plight. Perhaps he could merely look inwardâ€”towards himselfâ€”and postulate any person's struggle. For one, Chris was an orphan. A foster child living in and out of homes and families. He knew what it was to suffer, not to be loved, and be powerless to change it. There were a couple of stand-in parents who mistreated him throughout his younger years, and Chris never had any set of people to call true family, sometimes even friends. He had gone it alone pretty much his whole life, scrapping here and getting by there. Like anyone with a strong survival instinct, he excelled at his techniques. He improved his outcome little by little. He faked his identity more times than he could remember to land decent jobs or a halfway decent education. He was always under the radar, off the grid, convinced that he was alone in the universe. But in order to stay alive and get what he needed, he had to develop a keen understanding of what he was never given: social aptitude.

Through reflection and cogitation, Chris grew a meticulous insight into people and their problems.

It was uncanny.

He never really held real relationships with people. If he did, they were short-lived. He was always on the go, never stagnant. Yet, he knew people and knew their desiresâ€”no matter how big or small. He could nail a person likeâ€”|_that_. In the mere time it took a person to snap a finger, he could take one look at someone and figure out their life story, their outlook on life, their personality, their virtues and vices, their ambitionsâ€”if any.

All he needed to do was look inside to really figure people out. There was no mystery, no otherworldly quality to people that was unfathomable. Nothing that couldn't be cracked other than their dreams. Everyone shouldered the same set of burdens. Everyone was fraught with similar grief at some point in life.

He thought back to the days of grade school, of teachings in psychology and humanities and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Chris could probably nail down a person's toil in life, being the people person that he came to be. He could look sky-deep into a person's eyes, grasp their fire, and figure out everything there was to know he was so perceptive. But more, he had empirical research to back up his assumptions about anyone. Go by this model, this hierarchy, and Chris could discover what it really was that people were hankering for.

At the very base of human requirement was the physiological kind: air, food, water, the elements of absolute necessity.

Next, were safety needs: shelter, clothing, sense of security over one's surroundings.

Higher up in the pyramid was compassion and a sense of belonging. This included friends and lovers.

Just below the apex was the desire for self esteem: a sense of purpose in society, dignity and maybe a stipend of recognition.

And at the very top was the epitome of sentient existence: self-actualization. Confidence to pursue goals and dreams, the will to achieve, and of course, freedom.

So where did Justin and his friends fit into this grand scheme of things?

Chris picked apart the model piece by piece. Their physical requirements were obviously satisfied. They were alive and breathing. Maybe it wasn't the best food Chris had ever had at City 17's chow hall, but it had the vital nutrients and it didn't taste too stale.

Did they have adequate safety here? Traxus IX wasn't exactly safe, that was certain. But at least Justin and the others lived in relative safety, far from the dangers encountered by living anywhere else in this cold, bleak rock of a planet. It was funny, Chris thought, that at any other place, safety needs included job security,

a retirement plan, and supplemental insurance. This place had none. But maybe here you _needed_ none. You certainly weren't getting it; THI would never offer anyâ€|and why would they? Not as long as the felonious masses held partial rule over the planet and there were secrets to be kept. It just wouldn't happen.

Did Justin or anyone else feel compassion towards another? Or a sense of belonging? Probably not. Justin didn't have a lover here, but he did have friends. That is, if they all considered one another as true friends. Chris figured they weren't the average set of buddies. They were cruel and disrespectful towards one another, only relenting their callous mannerisms when life was at stake. Other than that, it seemed like a genuine mindfuck they played in day after day. Justin certainly treated Chris like human excrement so far. He was possessive and untrusting. He was also the most insensitive of the bunch short of Pete, stopping his belittlement only after Chris came to tears. _What kind of a friend does that? _he thought.

No. Their friendship seemed more like mutual benefit to Chris. They shared a commeraderie among one another only because they themselves gained from it, not because they cared for one another. They were all living but a fraction of a real existence. By _any_ rights, none of them were truly alive. It was a wonder anyone here could go on with even the will to be.

But were they really so bad? Over enough time, people start to become a product of the environment they live in after all. And this _was_ a brave new world Chris had entered.

Traxus IX. You had to be sharp and tough, always on your guard, always willing to fightâ€|for your life if necessary. You had to be cruel and cunning even if it meant betraying your own humanity. And you couldn't ever go it alone out here. You had to team up from time to time, gain strategic advantage over those that might seek hostility toward you.

Traxus IX had a way of banding people together, whether in friendship or foeship.

Chris already knew the answer to whether or not any of them held any true self esteem:

No.

They had no reputation to be concerned with here. None of them sought recognition; there was no one to impress.

And dignity? You were robbed of it the moment you set foot on Traxus IX. You were stripped of your safety, your love, and your precious dreams.

Nowâ€|did Justin or any one of his friends have any confidence or the will to pursue any sort of dream? Was there anything to dream _of_?

Possibly. Maybe of another life on another world, but dreams were utterly useless here. _Hopeâ€|_was utterly useless here. There was no leaving, in which the final question begged to be answered:

Did they have freedom?

That remained to be seen.

For now, Chris put his ruminations to the side and wondered just how much more twisted one's existence here could possibly be. The lonely, yet beautiful day was certainly the shroud over a desolate existence on a bleak and tainted world. But it was their epigrammatic slice of heaven, if only for a day. Their treasured and elusive sun was quickly waning. Now, they chased it down as it fell behind the smog-choked horizon, currently City 17's skyline. This would be the last of bright days for a long time. The future held darknessâ€”

â€”In more ways any of them could ever imagine.

They were all smiling brightly as Justin drove up the final ramp into the main complex of City 17. Behind them, the deepening dark of the city's tunnel beckoned, and the mighty Eastern spire towered above all else on the other side, a patient and watchful sentry presiding over the lands. Bill, Pete, and Ken carefully used the edges of their skis against the concrete ground. No longer fine sugar sand and clay, they had to watch their equipment and make sure the blades still maintained an edge, and they didn't have the necessary sharpening tools just yetâ€”Justin was working on that. He'd steal a set of them just like he stole the skis from an old outbound pallet. Another poor set of vacationers would not receive their equipment as they ventured towards the mountains of another world. _Boo-fucking-hoo, _Justin thought.

They reached the main factory and Justin coasted to a stop outside the bay doors so the others could remove their skis and overboots. They did so and Chris dismounted the aft section of the Mongoose, stretching his legs as well as his tensed forearms. Hopefully sometime soon his muscles would adjust to the constant strain he was putting them through. He'd have some beefy limbs, that was for sure. He'd probably need them too, he just realized.

"Could you teach me martial arts?" Chris suddenly asked Justin.

As though reading Chris' mind, "Sure, in a while."

Chris beamed back at Justin with excitement and trotted over to the main doors. Justin merely ignored the boy's zeal as he prepared to drive the ATV into the factory, secure it, and begin his shift.

They all walked a few paces after Justin's lead and entered the white, sterile light of the factory floor. The bay doors procedurally closed behind them with a resonant shudder. Their shift had just begun.

Chris, Bill, Pete, and Ken were milling around Justin as he chained up his Mongoose to the facility's grounding busbar. "Hey," Pete said, pointing over to a conveyor belt in the distance. "Isn't that that one girlâ€”Layla?"

"Yeah," Ken said, "it is. I think she's staring at us."

"Not us." Bill said, his deep voice soothing the very air around them. "At Justin."

Reid felt the eyes around him, a pressure on his skin as he perked his head up and looked over in the general direction everyone else was a moment earlier. He found her, her eyes locked onto his. She was smiling ever so slightly.

"I think she likes you, buddy." Pete said. "God damn, she is so hot! Why don't you go over there and grab her ass? She wants it, man. Give it to her."

"Shut the fuck up." Justin snapped. "You know nothing of women."

"I know _one _thing." Pete smirked. "I was married to one."

"And?"

"Actually, two things. I was married to one, and she was a rotten bitch."

"Yeah, well I actually care about this one. You don't just grab the ass of someone you care about. There's more to it than that."

"Justin Reid cares?" Pete chuckled. "I will believe that when Hell itself has frozen over."

"Look around you," Justin replied, "it already has."

Pete waved a dismissive hand and squinted into the distance. "But seriously, what is she doing here? Native-born? Figures, she's practically a girl. Look at her. She's so young. Innocent, even. Maybe Chris ought to grab 'er ass." Pete glanced down at the boy and winked. "Grab it, dude."

Chris didn't respond, only observed the connection between this girl and Justin.

As everyone left to go clock in, Bill stayed behind just a moment and leaned over to Chris. "You see, Chris, even in winter a flower can bloom."

Everyone was eventually clocked in. They all took their places at various conveyor belts, some of which brought up scraps of jagged metal, pieces that would eventually be fused together in a molten vat at another complex below ground. Other troughs brought up minerals and ores from mines far below, where other workers and autonomous equipment labored in the deep far from the city. A different conveyor belt, a different duty. Chris stood next to Ken at one belt, separating the heavier materials from the lighter so that technicians further on in the city could use them to engineer whatever it was they wanted for the good of the company. He looked on to the end of the factory where the conveyor belt drove right into the far wall, disappearing down into the depths of 'who knows where'. This place was so vast and odd, the grandeur of it eluding Chris until now. There was no telling just how immense and intricate the network of facilities truly was, and he had a hunch that he'd never be allowed to work in all areas for his time here, but merely confined to a small portion of the greater machine. There were mines, shafts, conveyors that stretched for miles, underground passageways, and huge cities with corporate offices overshadowing them from above.

At another conveyor, Justin stood slightly hunched over, inspecting metal fragments under a 200X magnification scope cupped to his right eye with internal ultraviolet backlightingâ€”magnaflux inspections, only administered by the more seasoned and higher-tenured of workers. A 'high-trust' duty in the shop, seeing as how they themselves verified the very makeup and integrity of THI's shipping containers. Along with the laborious and sometimes monotonous inspection they did, they received 'special' compensation. Better food, better this and that, and whatever they fancied. Drugs, alcohol, a guard looking the other way at exactly the right momentâ€”it was how they stayed afloat. Trustees had their niche here.

"Hey, Justin." Chris said, approaching. "What can I do?"

Justin peered up and set his monocular device down. He glanced around, but there wasn't anything readily in need of low-level service, nothing at the apprentice level. The factory was already so busy and in high-gear, no demand for odd-jobs at the moment. He then saw a working pile of metal plates stacked near his station, left there the previous day from another Trustee. They were heavily oxidized and in need of rust removal. "I could use some Phosphoric acid. Know where it's located?"

Chris looked around in a dilligent but futile gesture. "No idea."

"HAZMAT locker right over there." Justin pointed to a far corner near his parked vehicle. "Big yellow sumbitch over there. Open it, use the MSDS display to find what shelf it's on, and be sure to fully close that locker."

"Dangerous chemical, I gather."

"It's highly-corrosive to just about everything, especially human skin. Make sure that cap is on tight before you lug it over here. It's in large, heavy jugs."

"Heh, jugs."

Justin smirked. "Get going, kid."

Justin rolled out the day's production one piece at a time, in his own groove. Long and wide plates of high-value alloys rolled on by at a snails pace as he scoped them out. He felt eyes upon him, staring. He looked up to see who it was: Layla.

She was not too far off at another conveyor, further down the line. There she was, smiling again. What he wouldn't do to be with her, if even just to talk with her and come to know such a beautiful girl. Could she really like him thenâ€”after she got to know him? Justin wondered.

He had a lot about him he needed to change if he was to court a girl like her. She was so beautiful. Golden hair draped down to the nape of her curvaceous and graceful neck. The way her fragile shoulder bones wore her overgarment, and the bust of her breasts. He stopped looking.

"Why don't you just go talk to her?" Bill asked. "I'm sure she'd like

that. Get to know her before someone else snags her."

"Maybe I willâ€|one of these days."

"Don't let it become too many. She'll slip away."

Justin thought about that as he looked back at her. And she still had a steady eye on him. One of these days, he'd work up the courage to walk up to her, look her in the eye and ask her out. She obviously wanted that. Why else would she offer him the time of day? _And_ a smile?

Something bad just happened.

Noticing the sparks flying between Justin and Layla, a familiar and unwanted face strode into Justin's view.

Jim Carsa.

Justin's nemesis slid up behind her with an ugly sneer directed squarely at him.

The low-life gangbanger sported his shaved head proudly. It was waxed and reflected the light of the bay, calling further attention to himself. Justin stared into his eyes: they were wide and awake with street smarts, but nothing else. He put his bastardly nose right up to Layla's golden, flowing hair and took a whiff, smiling sinfully, taking what wasn't his to take like a heedless criminal. She gave him the cold shoulder, walking away and averting her eyes from his. But he couldn't, wouldn't take her suggestion. He kept on pressing her, stalking her around the conveyors like a parasite.

She had enough at this point. She stopped, turned to face him with a look so irritated that she might just throw a slap.

He put his hands on her shoulders, groping.

Layla instinctively looked to Justin, a cry of help in her eyes.

That's when Justin about lost it. He pushed off the conveyor frame and made for Jim.

Pete and Bill held him back, though. It took all their strength at first, but Justin eventually calmed down as Jim backed away. He knew Layla could handle herself, but he thought he'd just throw in a little emphasis to the point trying to be made: _get lost, you little prick_.

She was obviously a survivor. She'd done it all her time here at City 17. Jim would take the hint, or Justin would have to _make _him take the hint. She didn't want him. Nobody around here preferred his company despite looking the other way any time he spread tensions into the city.

"I swear," Justin said, "one day me and that shit are gonna tangoâ€|and he's gonna be the one taking the fall."

It wasn't before Jim gave Justin one last look across the building that he finally left her alone, and exited through the far

door.

"That just ruined my whole fuckin' day." Justin pummeled the palm of his hand with the other fist.

Bill and Pete finally loosened their grip on Justin.

Serenity was the temperament of Bill himself. The only thing he despised was heated confrontation. He was calm, cool and composed everywhere he went. He was the consoling and reassuring factor in the group's lives, his very disposition sometimes being enough to bring morale on the up-and-up, as well as his deep, resonant voice. Bill, the holy man, the anchor in their otherwise turbulent lives. Bill never had or never would have any enemies, a friend to anyone.

Pete was just very laid back and a the epitome of laziness. His malevolence, whenever envoked, was subdued and clever, seldom evident. He definitely spoke his mind and was no one's pawn. But for his part, it also meant he was incapable of caring for anyone else, maybe even his own self for that matter. Everyone had their past and their demons; Pete was no exception. "Forget about that dick." he said, immediately going back to work. "Just another day at the salt mines."

Justin took a breath, unclenched his jaw, and mellowed out for a moment before he regained focus on the day's business. He turned the UV light back on and renewed his inspections for the great THI. "â€|Another day in paradise."

9. Quirk

**Quirk**

Another day, another shilling. That's the way life worked on any other world. Denizens of Traxus IX, however, more or less worked for freeâ€|a different kind of slavery.

But survival needs were met. They had the essentials. They had breatheable air, potable water, tolerable food, and hopefully some modest shelter capable of withstanding the cold and the wind.

Everyone had their frivolities as well. Alcohol was a favored commodity. For the more daring, narcotics and other more restricted contraband was certainly accessible with cunning or the right connections inside the factory-cities. In a way, life here could be quite liberating in comparison to how other colonies functioned, their societal norms. Certain people fit right in. Most of life's worries were simply nonexistent at Traxus IX. Paying bills, keeping in good standing with your bank, staying in line with your taxes, paying down that credit balance, maintaining an upstanding reputation around the office, and worrying about the safety and well-being of loved ones...none of it applied. The only thing that mattered, that had any weight, was instinct and a strong propensity toward survival.

Some actually loved it, the adrenal rush and uncertainty of it all. Any day could be one's last. Every day there was something to witness if non-sheltered existence was choice. Most lived without rules and

without much consequence to their actions, able to do anything while bound to the desolate sphere of Traxus IX. Their own boss; no one could tell them anything.

The only rule was work or starve. Beyond thatâ€|? No rules. Keep THI's production on the up-and-up and you'd be rewarded with everything you needed to live by, plain and simple.

The night had already surrendered to day as their shift ended. Everyone followed Justin to the facility entrance where they were met with a face full of gloomy luminosity, sun habitually rendered arrears of the clouds. The world seemed a bit less bright as each year passed, the result of a climactic phase shift called global dimming. More and more particulate entered the troposphere from the planet's industry, the clouds themselves a cocktail of part water molecule, part chemical vapor, part manmade fallout. A volatile mix. "I think I will stay tonight," Bill said, stopping short of the bay door.

"Going to give prayer?" Pete asked.

"Yes. I'll sleep here."

"Alrighty then, your holiness. We'll pick you up next time around." Justin said good-naturedly, surprisingly. He walked off.

Everyone waited outside for Justin as he warmed up the Mongoose. They readied themselves for the ride back, donning overcoats and ski boots and gloves. Once Pete and Ken were situated in their skis, Justin moseyed the ATV outside the bay doors as they procedurally closed behind him. Pete and Ken grabbed an end-link of the fan out rope attached to the trailer hitch. "How are we on fuel?" Pete asked, wiping dust off his visor.

"Should be okay." Justin retorted. "Chris, hop yourself on the 'Goose so we can get back to the igloo. I need my Z's today."

"Yeah," Chris said in agreement, "that Carsa fellow sure worked you up. You look like you need the rest."

"Shut up, get on."

Chris didn't say another word as he took pillion.

* * *

><p>Justin was the first to wake. For a moment, he just stared up at the metal ceiling of his igloo-like structure. He was just inside of the atrium this time, sprawled out on the red velvet couch. It was some of the best sleep he'd had in months. Pete was likely on the cot. He'd rarely let anyone else claim it for a night. That left Ken and Chris, undoubtedly zonked out in sleeping bags over a bare, dirt floor. Poor bastards, but better them than him. He shifted position under the wool covers, almost fetal to get some warmth going. His joints were cold-soaked for however many hours he'd rested, groaning with every move made. He thought about just lying there for a whole day. It was so easy to, but then again, that got boring very quickly. And he'd rather see Layla's beautiful face than stay here. He would work up the nerve to talk to her. He had to. It was the only good thing going for himâ€"now and probably ever.<p>

Bill was back at the city, reciting prayers to all who'd attend. By the amount of pale light seeping through the metal cracks of the door seams, Bill would probably be expecting Justin's ATV soon. Justin might just bless Bill himself if he was in good graces with whatever God was out there, _if _there was a God out there. But Justin figured long ago that God wasn't on his side, or had just forgotten about himâ€”as He did so many others in the universe. Maybe Traxus IX was the Devil's domain.

He shook off his musings, peeled away his covers and stretched before rising up from the dank couch. Goosebumps spread across his entire skin like a flesh-eating Staph infection. It was utterly cold in the igloo, but at least Pete had remembered to close the front door this time so there was no wind cutting into the hollow of his bones. How Pete could stand this cold was anyone's best guess.

Justin dressed himself in the warmest clothes he could find and left for the outside. The outermost door of the igloo screeched open slowly as all other doors did. One of these days he'd steal some lubricant from a stockpile so the incessant noises would diminish. Sometimes, only the little things mattered. They were starting to get on his nerves as the cold bit into his first layer of clothing, the coolness spreading underneath. The day was half over now. They had all slept it away. A waste, he thought, on another world, another life. Here, it mattered not. He walked around the outside, skirting the perimeter until he found the stolen pallet full of water bottles. Some convenience store on some colony's main highway was a few units short this week. He took two bottles, quickly stowed them in his pockets and went back inside, kneading his cold hands together.

Once seated on the couch, he cracked open a bottle and made sure it wasn't frozen. He downed it in seconds and kept the other one on his lap while he opened a comic book. He noticed that Chris appeared through a doorway. "How'd ya sleep?" Justin asked.

"Like shit." Chris replied. "When is it my turn to sleep on the couch or the cot?"

"Neverâ€”if you keep asking bitch questions like that."

"Whatever."

Justin flipped a page, laughed out loud.

"What?" Chris asked.

"Did you ever read about the death of Superman?"

"No."

"I find it quite funny."

"Why is that?"

"Wellâ€”Superman is the savior of the human race. He protects them and inspires them, right? Well, along comes his great enemy and he kills him. Kills Superman. And everyone is all sad and shit."

"What's so funny about that?"

"Because he's Superman!"

"I don't get it. He just died."

"But he's Superman. Don't you think he'll come back? The hero always does. They just made that episode to get people more interested."

"Well, of course they did." Chris said. "You have to go along with the story, don't you? You have to suspend logic and reality to actually enjoy a comic, don't you think?"

Justin smiled giddily at Chris, taking the young boy by surprise. "This little stack of pages is one of a kind. I stole it and hundreds others from City Seventeen years ago. Would be priceless on some other world." With a flick of his wrist, Justin tossed the comic to the dirt floor and the fine silt beneath it plumed outwards as it claimed an LZ for itself. He stood up. "We're going to work today, you and me. Get ready to go."

"What about Pete and Ken?"

"Let them sleep. Let's go."

Justin headed outside to start up the Mongoose.

* * *

><p>Chris was Justin's apprentice for the day, learning the techniques of magnaflux inspections. If not for Justin, with his tenure and skills here, Chris would be reduced to laboring at the mines or in the phosphate pits with the other less fortunate workers.<p>

The day for Justin Reid at the City 17 factory became a day just like any of the other thousands before it. Routine, normal, and cool. No worries here; just work as usual.

This was until Jim Carsa showed up. Justin hadn't actually noticed Jim's presence to begin with, being immersed in his duties for the day. His whole face was deep into the metal workings of cargo containers, magnifying scopes covering his eyes half the time. He was oblivious to Jim.

"Uh-oh..." Chris said from Justin's side.

"Hey, jarhead."

Justin removed the scope from his left eye, put down his utensils and wheeled around to see Jim standing over him.

"Hey, Jim. What's crappening?"

"Came to talk to you about the fight you had the other night. Two of my buddies said you attacked them for no reason."

"Wasn't me. Must've been some one else." Justin turned his back on

Jim at this point, peering back into the scope and resuming his inspections as if Jim didn't even exist. And to Jim, Chris didn't exist as well. The rough-and-tumble gang member hadn't even paid the boy a glance, and for once Chris was glad to be invisible.

"I think not, because they said the one who did it goes by the name of Justin."

Justin looked sidelong over to Chris with a scold in his eyes, remembering the night it happened. Chris came back on the Mongoose when Justin instructed him not to, _and_ called out his name before they drove away.

"I did some checking," Jim continued, "and there are only two Justins that work in City Seventeen, and only one of them was a grunt."

"What does me being a Marine in the last life have anything to do with your friends getting their asses kicked. Talk to the other Justin."

A newfound rage swelled inside Carsa. "Only someone with military training could've done that to them."

"That's great."

No reaction came from Jim. He turned and walked away.

"Wow," Chris said, "that's it? I thought he was gonna fight you for sure this time."

"It's called progressive discipline. Start off with the least amount of hostility, and gradually ratchet it up until the situation is handled. Fortunately for me and my short temper, he pretty much took care of it for himself. See how that works?"

"Yeahâ€¦don't be eager."

"That's right." Justin said with a smile. "Nobody wants problems, even people who want problems."

"Wellâ€¦then why is that Jim fellow groping on Layla and looking right at you?"

"What?!"

Justin threw down his tools and faced Jimâ€"at the far end of the line where Layla was. He had her in his arms. She was appalled, so much so that she managed to break free of his embrace and run to one of the breakrooms.

A momentary standoff occurred between Justin and Jim, a stare down. A battle of the wits. Jim was the first to blink, consequently following Layla into the room.

The room with one-way windows that Justin wouldn't be able to see through from the outside.

He made after Jim without another moment's thought.

Jim was already inside by the time Justin started off.

Justin didn't run, but he approached the door quickly, managing to move quite discretely amid the factory floor. He flung the door open and saw her with her in the corner of the break room, hovering over her cringing form.

"C'mon, let me open up your lunchbox, girl."

"Justin!" she shouted as he neared.

Turning to face Justin was the last thing Jim could do before he fell to the floor from a tremendous blow from Justin's strong fist.

Justin instinctively went to her after assessing that Jim was out for the count. "Did he hurt you?"

"No. Iâ€¦I'm okay." she swept hair from her face.

"Let's get you home."

He walked her out of the break room briskly, past the conveyors and out of the bay doors, Chris following closely behind. They tried to pay no mind to the many onlookers as they hurried out, soon reaching the bay doors as they parted. "Where's your ride?"

She replied, "Over there, at the other vehicle rack." she pointed hurriedly.

"Chris," Justin said, "get her over there, then meet me back at the 'Goose. We're going home early."

Chris nodded and took off with Layla.

As soon as the two of them departed, Justin headed over to a set of employee vehicles not unlike his. He yanked all their fuel lines loose from the bodies of the fusion carberators. Not wasting any time, he freed up his own vehicle near the facility entrance, drove it just barely outside and waited there to pick up Chrisâ€"who was running back at full speed.

"Did you get her out of here?"

"She's gone."

"Good. Time to leave."

Chris mounted pillion, and they both looked over their shoulders before driving away just in time to see Jim emerging from the break room and into view along with two of his cohorts. Justin took a moment and looked hard. These were the same two thugs that Justin had dispatched nights prior. He smirked as he saw droplets of blood running from Jim's forehead to an eye. They both knew there was no chance of Jim catching up to Justin. Jim raised his chin and butted his fists together by the thumbs right before running full speed to his vehicle near the entrance, one of the ones Justin sabotaged. Justin nailed the throttle before he got too cocky.

"Let's hope we can outrun them." Justin said over his

shoulder.

"Yeah." Chris replied, adrenaline lacing his voice.

The Mongoose whizzed towards the tunnel exit, a wild spray of dust behind them. Soon they were in darkness, the only light to be had emanating from the ATV headlight. In hardly any time they reached the gate with the usual set of sentries manning it. "What about these guys?" Chris asked, "Can't they help us?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? These guys don't care about anything more than having to sweep up our guts after the fight is over, so long as the bullets don't fly their way."

"Shit. Go!"

Justin slowed the vehicle and waited for the gate guard to let them through. "Justin, what are you doing?" Chris demanded through gritted teeth. No answer.

The guard approached the Mongoose's flank. "I think the guy behind me sabotaged one of the factories." Justin said as he darted off again.

Chris looked back and saw the sentries lining up at the gate and take up defensive positions. "How did you know what to say?"

"Guards certainly care about the welfare of the factory. If it shuts down, we all get screwed. That'll stall them for a while."

"Nice."

They sped through the outer sanctum. They were more or less home free. At the ominous fork in the road past the admin district of City 17, Justin halted the Mongoose.

"What are you doing?" Chris asked.

"We can't go home just yet."

"Why not?"

"It's night time and when they get here, they'll see the dust we've kicked up in their headlights. They'll follow us all the way home."

"Then what? Let them come! We've got me, you, Pete, and Ken. We'll kick their asses!"

"No. We'll be dead. They've got lots of guns with them, and we've only got one shotgun at the igloo. That gang sign they threw upâ€¦it's means we're dead, no matter what."

"Marked for death?"

'That's what I just said."

"So what do you do if you're both working in the same shift again?"

"We won't be."

"How do you know?"

"You'll see soon."

"What about right now? Where do we go? We can't just sit here. They'll be coming this way!"

"But we can't go home either." Justin was about the maneuver the Mongoose, but something caught his attention.

A man could be seen and heard running across the open plains, heading in their direction. The individual was screaming with arms flailing all around, running for dear life it seemed. The voice was dry and hoarse from carrying on the way it had, longer than either Justin or Chris could guess. He came within a stone's throw when Chris shouted, "Hey, are you alright?"

Justin looked back and belted Chris across the mouth with his open palm. "What are you thinkin' about?!"

As Chris rubbed away the pain radiating between his lips, Justin eyed the man warily, ready for anything. But the crazed man just kept running at top speed, showing no intent of attacking them as Justin had envisioned. He simply ran right around their ATV as if an obstacle and scurried towards nothing, running from nothing, eyes wide with horror and screams filled with terror. The Doppler shift of his tormented voice faded into the opposite horizon.

"That was weird." Justin muttered.

"Why did you hit me?"

"I didn't hit you, I lightly slapped you."

"Why did you slap me?"

"Becuase I am the counter weight to all your stupidity." Justin stood up on the footpegs and squinted into the distance, scanning for anything else unusual from the direction in which the crazed man originated from. Justin watched until the nomad was half the size he was earlier, his figure dissipating into the smog-choked horizon. "Next time something like that happens, remain still, keep quiet, and for shit's sake let me do the thinking." He arced the handle bars hard to one side and slowly moseyed the Mongoose about before giving it full throttle.

They gained speed, soon transitioning from road to dirt. Chris attained a firm footing on the bootpad, stood taller and peered over Justin's shoulder as they zoomed closer to the solid rock wall looming dead ahead. The dial read 80 kph. Justin wasn't slowing down.

"You're gonna run into that wall!" Chris shouted.

They were right upon it, the impenetrable bulwark looming over them. Chris hoped Justin was showing off again, but something told him Justin went crazy, and he thought about bailing out. Instead, he

hesitated, glanced at the hard and unforgiving ground moving so fast beneath him. He closed his eyes and braced hard for whatever Justin resigned them to.

But nothing came except cool air and a draft. Chris felt negative inertia as Justin firmly activated the brakes.

"We're inside the entrance to a mine shaft. Keep quiet and we'll watch them ride right by us."

Chris opened his eyes and was met with a face full of pitch blackness. Justin righted the Mongoose around to face the entry way they came through, giving them some stable reference. He killed the 'Goose and removed the key so the headlight was completely doused. The day was about to transform to an eerie night. Justin hadn't been out during the night in quite some time. In fact, he could remember only one time he was out like this. One memory came to mind: the Battle of Gulag Hill. He was out then. Him, Bill, Pete, and Ken were all out that night. Everyone on Traxus IX was.

He shook off that memory.

"Why is it taking so long?" Chris asked.

"I removed one of their fuel lines."

Chris would have complemented Justin, but he was still angry that he had hit him. Like most of the time on this ATV, Chris remained silentâ€"this time out of bitterness.

Moments later, the humming of two ATVs riding in tandem became audible to Justin and Chris, echoing off the bulwark surrounding them. Headlights emerged from the outer courtyard and soon the riders could be seen, two of them on one Mongoose and one on the other. They stopped dead center on the fork in the road. Thankfully, the night gloom and the ambient dust hung dense enough for Justin and Chris not to be seen.

Jim and his cohorts remained there for a moment before riding away, down the wrong fork in the road, the more unpleasant of paths to choose from.

The noise of their engines faded and that's when Justin decided to fire up the Mongoose. He switched on the headlamp and was about to clear the entrance to head back homeâ€|

â€|when he saw the strangest thing on the ground in front of him.

"What are we waiting for?" Chris asked.

"Shut up. You see that?" Justin said, pointing in front of the ATV. Justin was spellbound at what he saw. Chris took notice even from pillion.

"Whoa. What is it? It looks like gold."

"I don't know." Justin hopped off the ATV and walked towards the entrance. He bent down and stared at what looked likeâ€|"Flowers? This can't be."

"Be what?"

Justin knelt down next to them, absolute amazement in his eyes. As if he stumbled upon some ancient treasure of unfathomable worth.

"Flowers." Justin said, annoyed.

Even though Justin said earlier that nothing grew on Traxus IX, Chris didn't see what the big deal was. It was just plants. But Chris wanted to know Justin, to make friends. "I thought you said nothing grows here."

"I did say that. I was wrong."

"I wonder how anything could grow in this shit hole of a planet." Chris said, kicking the ground.

"I'm gonna take some of this."

Justin grabbed a few of the flowers by their stalks and yanked up. It took a surprising amount of effort to do so. He bent them and twisted them before they finally gave in. He scored a fist full of them and shoved them deep into his pockets. "C'mon. Let's get the hell back on home before Jim and his fuck buddies decide to come this way."

Chris jumped on the ATV and they sped towards the igloo.

10. Work Hard, Play Hard

Work Hard, Play Hard, Die Young

Justin activated the Mongoose's brakes rather abruptly. The thick knobs on the tires grabbed the loose clay hard and the chassis shuddered all the way to a stop just outside the igloo, where it always sat when unused. Justin dismounted, unraveled the chain and tethered the ride to a jacking rail along one side of the corrugated metal house. He clicked the padlock shut and gave the rotary dial a few counter-clockwise rotations to fully engage the internal deadbolt, pulling back on it just to be sure. Before he left for the inside, he recovered the kerosene jug from the front rack of the ATV.

The loud screeching of the outer door signaled everyone that Justin had arrived. Much to his surprise, Pete and Ken stepped over to the dirt-floor atrium to greet him. "What do you guys want?" Justin asked.

"Nothing, " Pete said, "just a little bored. Kinda want to go to the factory. Where's Bill?"

Justin frowned. "He's still at work. We had to leave in a hurry."

"Don't tell me..."

"Jim."

"Fuck, when is that guy gonna give up?"

"I suspect never." Justin brushed past Pete's shoulder half-occupying the doorway and set down the fuel canister near the couch. He then crashed downward into the cushions with a fatigue Pete knew all too well at the moment.

"So can me and Ken use the 'Goose?'"

Justin smirked and turned away, his reply. Pete simply assumed Justin became possessive of the ATV ever since Chris arrived to Traxus IX, but he truly couldn't tell. They had known one another at least ten years, and still his best of friends, his _only_ friends, couldn't get through to the real Justin.

Justin shifted his weight and the dampness soaked up by the fabric felt silky beneath his clothing. "I think it's best not to go to work for a little bit. We all need to lay low."

"It's just Jim, dude. He's not gonna try shit with us."

"It's different now." Justin finally met Pete's unrelenting gaze. "Things changed a little."

"How so? We're still stuck on this God forsaken rock, we're still dirt-poor, and we're still bowing down to the Man everyday by working' our tails off."

"Not that." Justin scratched his head.

"What?"

"I kinda knocked him out. In the break room. He was all over Layla."

"You stirred up a hornet's nest over a bitch?"

Justin shot up and left the comfort of the sofa, striding towards Pete, stopping short of arm's reach. He pointed a finger in his face. "Watch your fucking mouth!"

"Since when do you care about that bitch? I mean, I always knew you had the hots for 'er, but _man_, you really love this bitch."

Justin fumed with anger, his enraged eyes boring into the humorous wells of Pete's. But he kept his volatile temper in check; he needed to direct his energy in the right place. Pete could see Justin thinking it out. Jim Carsa—"a gang member with dangerous and well-motivated connections"—had them on RADAR. Enacting his already misplaced anger on Pete would only waste time.

Reid brushed past Pete and stepped out just beyond the door, breathing deep. Chris watched the moment unfold and withheld any interjection he might've deemed necessary, for once again it appeared as though the two were simply blowing off steam as they usually did.

"Yes, I like her. You already know that. Go make yourself useful and grab some waters."

Pete pivoted in place to look at Chris. "Chris, go get some waters."

"Fuck you, Pete, he asked you."

"Yeah, but shit rolls downhill and I need to pow-wow with J Reezy over here. Do like Justin said and make yourself useful."

Chris sighed and sauntered over to the pallet, making sure to grab plenty in order to avoid a second trip.

Pete faced Justin again as Chris paced away. "So then what are you going to do now, Casanova?"

"I'm going to make Jim disappear from all our lives. Layla will thank me later. And so will you."

Pete's brow raised, or rather it twitched in excitement as he stole two swift paces closer to Justin. "You're going to kill him? Holy shit! There hasn't been a killing in the City sinceâ€|God damnâ€|I can't even remember when!"

"Right." Justin said sardonically. "Let's get real here for once. We need a serious plan."

"Okay, what's the plan for real?"

"It's simple the way I see it. I'm gonna meet up with Gibson and tell him the situation. He'll understand."

"So, no killing then."

"No, Pete, no killing. What the hell is it with you and violence? Lay off the booze and smoke up with us once in a while, calm you down a little bit."

"Hey, you're not so monkish yourself, ya bastard. You're a pretty violent guy."

"Yeah, but only when it serves a purpose."

"So you're gonna kiss up to Gibson then? Let him fight your battles for you?"

"Look, I gotta fend for all of you, not just myself. You wanna be gung-ho? Go ahead, march out there and be the hero. You won't see me behind ya."

"You really think he'll give a shit?"

"For me, I think Gibson will. Anyone else and he'd let them go to fate."

"You and him always did see eye to eye."

"I'm going at daybreak."

"I'll go too if you need me to. I ain't afraid to throw down. Let's get everyone there while we're at it."

"No. Too many people isn't good. I need to keep a low profile. Plus, I'll need to be in and out, which means I need speed. Three guys on

skis is hardly ideal for the 'Goose.'

"Right."

"Chris is the only one going with me."

"_Why?_ He'd slow you down if you ran into trouble."

"He'll be fine, I can look after him. He needs to see more of the City and get familiar."

"He just got here."

"I _know_ that he just got here but he'll need to be able to look after himself sooner than later."

Pete whispered, "You're gonna kick him out?"

"Actually, nah, that thought hadn't crossed my mind."

"Why are you his babysitter all of a sudden?"

"I figure the kid is worth having around for the long run. He's not arrogant, he's easy to work with and he can take an order without getting too pissy."

"He can be molded."

"Keep your voice down, he's right over there."

"So what are your intentions?"

"Not as ambitious as you might think. Having an extra body around here will make light of work and stealing shit. And with his build, he should be quite capable by the time he's fully matured and fully trained by us. Chris is just the guy we need."

"And he looks up to you, too."

"Whatever."

"He still has to grow up, though. The kid's at mid-puberty. We'd have to train him up a _lot_."

"That's nothing new. We'll start soon enough. We'll get him tough. It'll just take a few"

Chris' approaching footfalls silenced Justin. "Here's your water, like you asked."

"Thanks." Reid said, taking a few bottles from Chris' grasp. He handed one to Pete and tossed the remaining bottles through the atrium door where they bounced lightly on the plush, moist couch.

Chris followed their arc until they settled into the red velvet, his eyelids nearly hanging from exhaustion.

"You've had a hard day, kid. Take the couch tonight."

Chris' eyes lit up briefly with perfectly innocent gratitude. In the next instant, he let his fatigue finally reign over his body and shuffled to the bacteria-infested couch, crashing down with feet raised over one armrest. He kicked off his shoes and slowly closed his eyes.

Pete cast a sidelong grin at Justin, who returned it ever more smartly. They split up and went their separate ways, Pete settling into the cot and Justin, at long last, taking a dirt-covered sleeping bag.

* * *

><p>Lightâ€"it barely seeped through the seam of the outer door. It was the same old pale haze of Traxus IX, though. Nothing special. Just nothing at all.<p>

Morning came along with a wet, freezing draft that sliced right through Justin's sleeping bag. He was cold to the core, but plenty used to it. He made sure to rise slowly.

Every morning, it felt as though his bones might snap from sudden movement. His body overtly warned him of it every time he woke. Everyone was a slow riser here.

And the igloo did nothing in the least to insulate them. It was just a conglomerate of plate steel. Just quarter-inch-thick metal sheets bonded over a framework with four-inch welds at one-inch intervals. Plenty of gaps. Though it definitely eliminated most of the wind gusts, it most certainly did not ward off the all-pervading cold. The metal walls just seemed to amplify it.

The time was upon them to invest in a better heater. The kerosene unit they stole some years ago was grossly outdated, indeed an antique. It produced merely 10,000 BTUs on good days and was a choking hazard with its Carbon emissions. The only way to avoid gaseous poisoning from its outdated combustion method was to place it in the room farthest from where they slept, and hopefully the fumes would effuse out the diminutive vent hood before they woke up sick or dead. For this reason, the heater didn't really do its job at all being too far away. The cold walls seemed to suck up all the warmth by the time it actually worked its way around to the sleeping room. A Hydrogen IC unit was clearly the only option to consider. Justin would add its acquisition to his now-growing list of priorities.

Accommodating the igloo was among the least of concerns now; showing up for work was hazardousâ€"more hazardous than usual.

Justin took a look around the atrium and into the rest of the main room, where the couch and the cot were. Pete was unsurprisingly zonked out atop the cot, snuggled up in wool, the typical selfish smug on his apathetic face. Ken was still dreaming in the sleeping bag next to Justin's. And Chrisâ€|

â€|was looking straight up at him. The boy lied on his back, wide awake.

"Did you sleep?"

"Yeah." Chris nodded.

"You just an early riser?"

"I haven't been a morning person since I got here."

"Sucks for you."

"Had a dream."

"Was it bad?"

"Yeah, couldn't sleep the rest of the night."

"That bad, huh? Well, don't worry about it."

"Do you still dream?"

"Sometimes."

"Ever bad?"

"I usually don't remember them."

"Is that by choice or circumstance?"

"You know, kid?" Justin was about to scorn the boy's inquisitive nature again, but something in the boy's eyes stilled Justin's displeasure. "I don't know, kid, maybe both."

"I could understand why you wouldn't want to remember your dreams, even if they were good."

"You and me both, kid. Everyone here, too."

Chris added rather assumingly, "But there was a time when you held onto them."

Justin replied, "Yeah, but little point worrying about it now, eh? The worst is over. You're here now and that's it. Nothing you can do about it." Justin uttered the words with finality in his voice, suggesting the end of the conversation.

"How did you deal with them?"

Justin exhaled explosively. "You don't really deal with them, you just get used to them. And over time they come to mean less and less."

"I wish I was older like you."

"I wish I was _younger_. I'd be far from here."

A smile crept on Chris' face. "I bet you've schemed up ways to get outta here."

"If I find a way, believe me, you'd be the first to know about it."

"Where would you go? If you had a choice."

"...I'd pick Crassus."

"_Crassus?_ Where's_ that?"_

"Exactly. Nobody knows about it. Nobody cares about it."

"You really don't care much for people anymore, do you?"

"You'll understand in a few years, buddy. Now, c'mon and get up. We're going to the factory today."

Chris' head tilted slightly. "I thought you wanted to lay low for a while."

"We're still gonna lay low, but we still have to go to the factory for critical shit. You wanna help, _don't _you?"

"Yeah! But what shit?"

"Gotta talk with an Administrator, gotta steal some things, fill up on fuel, get Bill back home, and then when all that's doneâ€|we're all gonna celebrate a little."

"Celebrate what?"

"Celebrate nothing. That's what we do."

"Okay. When are we leaving?"

"How soon can you get ready?"

* * *

><p>Chris was ready in a flash. His youthful energy shot him up off the couch like a young pup eager for food or attention. Justin proceeded outside to warm up the 'Goose while Chris took a few much-needed strokes of a toothbrush. He donned the thickest coat he could find and ran outside, shoving the defiant outer door shut as it groaned in protest.<p>

The ATV was all ready to go, fully warmed up to operating temperature. The confining cloud layer above was merely a graveball field above their heads, though not the lowest it had ever been. It felt there was still plenty of breathing room between them and the "ceiling". And the light from the neighboring star was a little more radiant than normal. Today was a reasonably good day. With any luck, it would stay that way; they'd receive blessings similar to this one and they could enter the city unscathed and unnoticed. Justin could run his errands without incident. Even Justin prayed for that as he released the 'Goose's choke lever.

Justin handed Chris a helmet. "Thanks." He said.

Justin didn't reply. As soon as Chris was situated on the back, they sped off.

The Mongoose glided smoothly over the flat, clay terrain. The whole ride to the outskirts of the factory was this wayâ€"smooth and without even a hint of altercation. This was normal, though. It was

when one got nearer to the City that things tended to get precarious.

Justin rightly eased down on the throttle and slowed down a bit. He was always prepared despite how mundane the routine became over the years. He'd never forget how Traxus IX got its true reputation—the one that outsiders never knew of. Greed, corruption, violence, chaos.

Heading on an uncorrectable course in an environment such as the City courtyard was just asking for trouble of any sort.

Now, he had more maneuverability. He could use gas or brake or a combination of both to steer them out of trouble should trouble show its face. He darted off the pseudo roadway, away from the ominous fork in the road and towards the Admin courtyard. Chris stole a glance down that ill-fated road before looking onward where they headed. He could see the office buildings more clearly than times before with cloud layer pushed back a little higher. Though the volatile clouds floated high above the structures, they still left behind a variety of chemicals clinging to the easements of every establishment, staining the heights of the buildings a puke-yellow. It was a distinct contrast to the clean, bone-white exterior of the well-maintained office buildings.

"Appearance is everything." Chris mumbled to himself.

"What's that?" Just asked.

"They keep this place so clean. What for?"

"Maybe it's a statement." Justin offered. "That's the way I see it."

"You're probably right, Justin. If you look closely, you can see the stain up top isn't very heavy. They have those rooves cleaned daily. If they left it alone, it'd probably be black by now."

"You've got an eye for detail." Justin said. "Hop off, we're going in."

"What about the 'Goose?'"

"Lock it up for me."

"You want _me _to lock it up?"

"Might as well get you used to it. You'll be driving this thing one day."

"Cool!"

Chris exuberantly wrapped the chainlink tether once around the base of the handle bars, twisted it once, and connected the ends to a water pipe entering the exterior of the building with the padlock.

"Good," Justin said, "now follow me."

Just opened the door to the lobby. They both stepped through.

It was climate-controlled. The floors were white ceramic tile, slightly soiled with clayish boot prints. Someone would be called to clean it soon. The lobby was like the typical waiting room—a lengthy couch, a monitor anchored high in the corner wall, and a water fountain. There were even magazines resting on a coffee table. All the texts were greatly worn and crinkled, obvious that people still wondered about, and adored, life on the outside. Chris was halted by Justin.

"You'll get to look at those later. We're here on business. Follow me."

Justin walked straight ahead past the lobby, to a set of narrow and steeply-pitched stairs, brass hand railings flanking them. The amenities of the building threw Chris for a loop. The whole planet was a dumpster, and now this. Justin took notice even from in front as they climbed the steps.

"All the possessions of this place don't amount to shit, Chris. It's just for the administrators' comfort. And believe me, they actually think they have it rough."

"Yeah." Chris granted. "So how long does the typical administrator stay at Traxus Nine?"

"However long they want. Usually, it's five years tops. Five years and they've made enough money to retire easily. Probably make enough to put their kids through tier one university too."

"What about this Gibson?"

"Heh, Gibson is...different. He's been here since the place was established, ten years."

"Why so long? He's probably got all the loot in the world now, huh? Why does he stay?"

"Some people require more money than others, I guess. But sometimes I think he vested himself in this place. He's more than just a company man from what I can gather. He likes his job and takes it seriously. And City Seventeen is his favorite place to be."

"Okay."

They rose the first flight. Off the landing of the second floor was a wide and narrow hallway stretching both directions, small office rooms stemming off the sides. Occasionally, the walls recessed in a meter or two and housed a water fountain or a snack dispenser. Chris wanted to snag some food, but remembered he had no money. He took in as much as he could before following Justin up another flight. The only natural light to be had in the whole place was from just two windows—only at the very ends of the lengthy corridor. All the rest was overhead fluorescent. A dreary and sleepy atmosphere.

Once more, they ascended. The slow journey upward seemed more like a session of calisthenics with such a steep grade. Chris latched onto the handrails just in case he lost balance or footing. Once at the third floor landing, Justin proceeded merely a few steps away and to the door of their destination. "Wait here." Justin ordered. "Don't

stray too far. I'll be right out."

Chris nodded. On the door, was stenciled "Mr. Paul Gibson".

Justin knocked once. "_Enter_." A muffled voice sounded. Justin deftly grabbed the door knob, turned, and stepped through with a swift inward push on the door.

There, sitting behind a rich and broad Cherrywood desk was Mr. Gibson. A short and full-framed man, with a full head of buzzed short hair and a stout mustache. He stood once and regarded Justin as he proceeded into the room. The admin was dressed business-casual: slacks, collared shirt and semi-dress shoes. Like the regional manager of a well-to-do company. Ironically, he was just this. The man's choice of dress was still odd, given the setting.

"C'mon in." Mister Gibson beckoned. "Hello, Reid. Take a seat. I assume you came here to talk about thisâ€"

He cued a television monitor near his desk and swiveled it around so Justin could see. On display for Justin was the confrontation he had only a day ago in the break room. Together they watched as Jim tried to dodge the fist that Justin threw. Then, the footage froze right as Justin cold-cocked him between the cheek bone and the eyebrow.

"Homerun." Gibson said absentmindedly. He ended the video with a push of a button and faced Justin with a prompting gaze.

"It was unavoidable." Justin began. "No choice. He was gonna do something to her."

"No doubt from the video this was self-defense. An assisted form of self defenseâ€|sort of. Relax, kid. You're not in any trouble because of this. I value your presence here much more than his. What would you like me to assist you?"

"I'm not sure. What can you do?"

"Well, we can't fire him. He's a solid worker and the company is always hard up for good employees. Speaking of which: you're by far my best. Without your inspections, well, you know how far behind we'd be. I can move you to another factory. You'd get a ride in my personal airlift. How about it? Nice change of scenery?"

"I'll make myself clear, sir: I'm not afraid of him. But I don't want to see him around Layla Jennings. He's a menace and he's after her because of me."

"After her? He's after you, son. We need to split you two up, that's the only solution I see here. I can't have violence in the workplace. It's bad for business and everybody has enough issues to cope with as it is. You of all people know that."

"Can't he be transferred or something?"

"Between here and where, Reid? You know there's miles of Hell between the factory-cities. We're not going to send that man to certain death out there." Justin folded his arms and shrugged in disagreement. "I'd airlift him outta here myself, but he's not worthy of it like you."

Listen," Gibson leveled his gaze, "I'm an administrator. I have to put the interests of the greater in front of the few in order to keep this place from going crazy. If I can keep good order and discipline in my workshops with minimal fuss and resolve the city's issues at the lowest level possible, God damn it I'm gonna do it. Saves me time and money. Saves the company time and money. And when the company is happy, we're happy. Catch my drift?"

Justin nodded. He understood perfectly well what the plant manager meant. There was justification in relocating him to another city because of his rare skill set. Justin and the admin always did see somewhat eye to eye.

Justin sighed. "Well, I'm not moving. I've got a good thing going here. She shouldn't have to change her life either. So where does that put us?"

"Well, unfortunately there's certain rules administrators must abide by. THI's policy is there as guidance for us, and in this kind of situation I'm limited to very few options. You don't want to billet down in another city, she'll probably feel the same way, and Carsa remains here because he's not marketable anywhere else. They wouldn't take him, and frankly I wouldn't feel like sending him. I'm just gonna have to exercise some of my discretionary power in this matter, yes?" Gibson grinned. "I'll make sure that shit-kicking bungler doesn't have the opportunity to come near you, or Ms. Jennings. You'll work separate shifts and separate days. Though, I can't guarantee total segregation. If the bastard wants to work overtime, I can't stop him. Company policy."

"Roger." said Justin. "You know you didn't have to go out of your way for us. You could just sit back as usual and let the natural order of things take place."

"Us?"

"Me and Layla."

"True, Reid. I could watch you kick the crap out of him again and again and it would be rather entertaining, but a man like that?" Gibson glanced sidelong at the video footage. "You know he'd just ratchet the bar every time. Eventually, the violence you two create will either end up in someone's death or just spread throughout the city, or both. All these people are easily seduced into treading down the wrong path from day to day. I can't have that here. But I can also be a politician when I need to be. When I'm not kissing babies I'm stealing their candy, right? I can bar him from the city on certain days, separate you two where I can. Minimize your encounters."

"THI would let you do that?"

Gibson grinned again. "No."

"I told you that you don't have to do this."

"Little choice when you're dealing with two hot-headed employees. Just keep this conversation between us, okay?"

"Okay."

"So what's going on with you and her anyway? You got something going?"

"I'm not totally sure, Mister Gibson."

"Only one way to find out." Gibson said with a lift of his brow, wiggling in his seat.

Justin laughed half-heartedly. "You know it." He felt an uneasy pressure, like a fire underneath him. Gibson reminded him of old frat buddies. The kind of people that gave him false encouragement that only false friends could harbor for one another.

As if sensing Justin's uneasiness, Gibson reclined back in his chair. "Get to know her. Talk to her. I'm sure she'd like it."

"Best advice I've heard for my time on Traxus, sir." Justin practically nodded. Gibson stood up and extended his hand, suggesting the end of the meeting. Justin mirrored the move quickly, for he wanted to leave his office and get on with his errands. "Thanks, Mister Gibson."

"Of course. Any time you have an issue, please feel free to come back and see me."

"Will do. Take care."

Justin spun on a heel and made for the door handle.

"Reid?" Mr. Gibson said, stopping Justin short of the door.

"Yeah."

"Try to get your friend, Pete Barker, to show up more often. He's been missing a lot of work lately."

"Okay, but I wouldn't say he's been missing it."

Justin just about closed the door.

"Reid!" Gibson said, grinning. "That was quite a nice shiner you left on Carsa's face."

Justin nodded, smiled, and turned through the door. On the way out, Justin felt the overwhelming feeling of déjà vu. Gibson reminded Justin so much of his old commanding officer, in a life long forgotten. He'd have to spend part of a day just conjuring up the memories in order to truly comprehend the brief glimmer of life he once had and seldom remembered. The drugs and the hardship of Traxus IX all these years had clearly made those memories obsolete and useless.

Once outside the office and with the door closed, Justin found Chris not too far away muddling near a telecommunications closet off the side of the corridor. "What are you doing?" Justin asked.

"What's all this?" Chris said.

Justin walked over. About waist-high was a metal cube anchored to the wall with circular grommets on all sides of it. Wires protruded out of them and snaked their way into the recesses of the wall, where they led to God knows where.

"Fiber optic J-box." Justin answered. "Let's go."

"What's a J-box?"

"Junction box. A fiber optic cable comes into this building and its signal gets split up into many more for each of the offices. It's connectivity for a CCTV network, that's closed-circuit TV, that monitors about every square yard of this whole damned city."

"You know about this stuff?"

"A little."

"A little sounds like a lot coming from you."

"A smart man doesn't master any one thing, he gains an understanding about many things. The Jack of all trades."

"And the Ace of none. So where are we headed now?"

"We're getting fuel for the 'Goose, stealing some shit, then pick up Bill at the All Faiths Chapel."

"Sounds like a battle plan."

* * *

><p>Justin and Chris took the Mongoose across town, through the dark tunnel where they halted briefly at the checkpoint, and finally to the factory district. Fuel was first on the agenda. Only this time, Justin was intent on stocking up a good deal more than usual. For this occasion, he had lashed down more fuel canisters along for the ride than usual. Altogether, he ensured that he would carry the total capacity for over 190 liters of automotive fuel. There was quite a bit more driving to do other than just to the City and back. He didn't mention the last place they were headed to in the day's errands.<p>

One by one, Chris and Justin dug in and filled all the jugs and secured them to the 'Goose. It was laden with fuel for the ATV, so much so, that Chris had to delicately choose his footing while riding pillion to their next destinationâ€"which was the stockyardâ€"situated at the easternmost tip of the City. At this location, aerospace vessels from high above would depart one of many THI orbital platforms, take a brief descent into the stratosphere and from there, drop massive amounts of supplies by parachute. Every batch of supplies was the same. Same quantity and type of food rations, mechanical items and electronics, and everything else it took to keep the City and its people running. Every time, always the same. The only time the contents of a shipment were altered was if there was a broken tool needing replacement or an Admin putting in for a special request.

Each shipment pallet that entered the atmosphere was a fully-enclosed containerâ€"meant to survive the brief period of vacuum high above as

it transitioned down to Traxus IX. As they glided downward, they steered themselves precisely to the same landing point just outside the City by way of sophisticated guidance packages, complete with guide fins. Technicians groundside would await the drop and tend to the crate when it landed. Once fully unpacked, the technicians would reassemble the giant crates and rig them up to the space elevator waiting mere paces away from the drop zone. The thick metal tether would hoist the pallet skyward, where it would complete its round-trip journey all over again in due time. The system worked flawlessly. The execs, the big wigs and VIPs had no physical contact with any of Traxus IX's inhabitants. THI had all bases covered in their bulletproof empire.

The drop zone was usually well-guarded, depending on what dropped. Everything to arrive from above was considered by all laborers here to be the most precious things. Food, water, pharmaceuticals, contraband, the little comforts.

Access was heavily restricted. Raids from gangs could easily take place here as there were no protective city walls to safeguard the drop shipments. The funding wasn't present, it seemed, to protect the sustenance of the workforce. Plus, the wind currents over the plains occasionally got the better of even the most sophisticated of guidance systems; the landings weren't always spot-on with the groundside beacons.

As such, the time-trusted employees guarding the drops were armed. Getting close enough to steal stuff was impossible, lest someone was desperate enough to test that and risk death or maiming.

But even people referred to as "time-trusted employees" didn't always live up to their titles. Fortunately for Justin, he had connections in the right places. All the sentries were in his own, close circle of personal trustees. City 17 functioned more so on circles upon overlapping circles of alliances and crooked transactions rather than rule and regulation. Admins knew it, and they tolerated it. Production was the best it ever was; consequently, they wouldn't change a thing in how Traxus IX operated.

After some friendly bullshitting with the guards, Justin made off with the goods he sought after, stowed them in an enclosure mounted to the 'Goose, and sped off once again to his next errand—to scoop up Bill at the Chapel.

The All Faiths Chapel was a place just as its namesake suggested. It was an enormous edifice off the southeastern front where people would go to worship. It was massive, divided into several sections—one for each type of religion. Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, and every other 'ism under the sun. Corporate representatives even went so far as to occasionally venture downward to the factories, holding meetings with department heads to probe their satisfaction with the religious services they offered. Religions most people never even heard of were offered at the All Faiths Chapel. People needed their faith. Funny, it was one thing that THI provided the people in spades, one thing they took seriously enough when it came to the well-being of their employees.

And that was just typical of THI. You were going to get what they wanted to give you, plain and simple. Take it or leave it. Over the years, Justin watched agnostics and atheists become believers.

Mostly, out of sheer boredom they converted.

But Justin still held onto his own cynical and survivalist ideals, blossomed from the influences of his own experiences both before and during his time in Traxus IX. Quite possibly, he fared better because of this choice, this way of life. He wasn't going to indulge in the Man's dowries. Not now, not ever. Justin needed only himself to make it through.

But that was not how others saw it. Bill, for instance, believed that God had a plan for every soul. And though the soul had the power to manipulate its own outcome, it could only do so to a certain extent. God had given man free will. But just as Bill always believed, he preached as wellâ€|that God giveth, and God taketh away.

Believer or non-believer, the universal and undeniable fact of life was that everyone had one final destination.

Death.

It made people from all walks of life ponder about life, death, and the prospect of an afterlife. Furthermore, it gave people from all walks of life the gumption to vest in a God that would grant them one. One portion of the human spectrum believed. And there were many underlying reasons for belief: the betterment of mortal life was oneâ€|improving moral values and beliefs and being good to thy fellow man. And of course there was the promise of the afterlife. And still there were others.

Another portion of the human spectrum were those that did not believe. Justin most certainly fit in here. For one, Justin wasn't raised into a religious upbringing. He never really thought much of religion, just that it was the culprit of nearly every major conflict to befall mankind. In fact, the more and more Justin observed the world around him, he began to realize that the prospect of religion and the afterlife concept was nothing more than a tool used by fear mongersâ€|leveraging the minds of the weak and fearful in order to right themselves a little higher in a short, doomed existence. _Give your money to the church, and God will save you from eternal hell_. That was the sales pitch.

And there was even more places in existence to categorize people. Pete, for instance, did not even care. He valued sleep more than anything else. He might as well be dead, the majority of his life a sedentary waste.

Every single being in the universe was unique. But...they were all the same in one way.

They all shared a common trait that bound them together in darkness.

Death.

Justin leaned against the fuel tank of the 'Goose, waiting outside the AFC for Bill to finish his sermon. Chris was nearby, smirking and kicking any of the small pebbles he could find. It seemed as though hours went by while they waited.

Finally, the day's services ended with the ringing of an entrancing

bell. Chris felt the sound waves deep inside his chest. The masses poured out of the great halls. The townspeople had just left their nonsecular escape.

Bill was among the crowd, who almost instantly spotted the ATV and made towards his friends after exiting the building. Bill exuded a natural gracefulness in his stride and demeanor, an air of soothing serenity about him as he descended the steps. He harbored no ill will towards even Traxus IX itself. Justin wondered how he managed it all these years as he greeted him.

"Sorry about last night. We had to jet. We had a little run-in with Jim."

"I am sorry to hear that. Hopefully, it will all blow over. Are you headed home?"

"Yeah. We didn't bring the skis, so you're gonna have to sit on the front rack."

"That's okay. Just go slow."

* * *

><p>The ride back to the igloo took longer than usual from Bill having to ride the ATV in an awkward positionâ€"atop the fore rack. It was a small area and ill-suited for a safe or comfortable ride.<p>

They arrived. Bill dismounted first, rubbing his backside from the metal bars of the rack digging into his skin. Justin and Chris took all the supplies into the igloo. "Where do you want the fuel jugs?" Chris asked.

"We're leaving them on the 'Goose.'"

"You don't think people would steal it?"

"No. We're not done going places yet. One more place to go and we need a lot of fuel to get there."

"Where?" Chris asked warily.

"We're going far South where an old friend of ours lives."

"Oh, I see. What for?"

"You know those flowers I pulled from the cave?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm pretty sure you can get high off them. But we need an outside opinion from an expert before we try that, though. Some plants'll kill ya."

"Does he know a lot about plants and stuff?"

"Oh yeah. You could say he lives his life by them."

"How do you find plants on a plantless world? And who in the Hell can

live off of plants?"

Justin ignored Chris' first question, but readily answered his second.

"Solomon."

11. Solomon

**Solomon**

Ken Sopher stormed out of the igloo, uncharacteristically wide-eyed, his blonde locks of hair bouncing with his steps as he ran towards the Mongoose that Justin quite literally just parked. Pete followed him out the atrium door lazily, as would be expected. He was keen to close the door behind him this time, deciding not to rile Justin up. Justin's mood could swing from one extreme the other in an instant, and Pete was too tired to deal with that prospect for the moment.

"Did I hear you right?" Ken asked. "We're going to Solomon's? Why didn't you tell me?"

Justin took his time in answering and lit up a cigarette as the Mongoose maintained its quiet thunder. He made a brief once over about the ATV, walking around it in a wide circle to make sure Chris had lashed down everything properly. All fuel canisters were there, as well as all the supplies they would need for the journey. "How the fuck are you so hyped?" Justin asked, perhaps not even expecting an answer.

"It's been a while." Ken said. "I want to go."

"Yeah," Pete said, "me too. Something else to do other than sit here or slave away at the city."

"Friggin' relax, we're all going. It's too dangerous for anyone to be alone anyways."

"Thanks to that bitch, Layla."

Justin shook off Pete's commentary and took another drag.

The mention of Layla prompted Chris to ask, "So what makes you all so afraid of Jim? Justin, didn't you teach him a lesson back at the city?"

"I did, but at a great cost. He's in with Sergei." Justin looked at everyone. "Get the skis, get what you need. You know the drill."

Bill took the time to walk over to Chris and said, "Make sure to dress warm. Grab a few waters, too. It's a long drive and we'll likely stay there a while." He received a firm nod from Chris. He gave the keys to him and said, "Lock up the igloo as well on your way out."

Chris headed inside to take what he needed.

At that moment, Bill looked to Justin and nodded. "I think it is good that you're teaching him how to run things."

Justin didn't reply.

One last stop at the stolen pallet of water bottles and Chris had everything. He made his way back to the groupâ€”huddled around the Mongoose.

"Anyone want water?" Chris said, his cupped hands overflowing with bottles.

"I'll take one." Pete said.

"â€”Just put 'em in the 'Goose." Justin ordered, tossing his smoke to the ground. "We need to get going if we're gonna beat sunset."

With that, everyone made their final preparations for the journey across the endless plains. Just how far they would venture, Chris didn't know. Justin's patience had already been tried to begin with, whether intentional or not. Thusly, Chris held back his inquisitiveness for the moment. The 'Goose's idle had sloped down to a mere hum, wisps of dirt and clay particulate drifting about the landscape as the others donned their ski equipment. The clouds were already starting to sink and the light of the day was at its peak as it crossed the sky's zenith. Half the day was gone. A yellow-tinged Dust Devil rotated over the top of an outcropping to the West where the wind currents were more prevalent. It drifted lazily, toward nowhere.

"That's so cool." Chris said.

"Always do your best to steer clear of those bastards." Justin said. "They herd together a nice amount of chemical in their vortex. You get caught up in one of those, and your skin will get bleached. You'll be itching for a week. And if you get any in your eyes..."

Chris frowned. Ugliness was everywhere here, even in beauty.

Justin released the 'Goose's parking brake, checked his gauges and gave it some throttle, and Pete, Bill and Ken were yanked from a stopâ€”due south on a straight course to Solomon's.

-

For two straight hours the Mongoose cruised at a high-pitched glide, Chris at the brink of sleep as the engine's vibrations thrummed through the frame of the ATV and into his skin. The throbbing of both the engine and the occasional divot in the clay made attaining one single wink of sleep arduous, though. From one minute to the next, Chris would either force himself to slumber or give up on it entirely; the engine wasn't so bad, but when the Mongoose jounced up from a bump, it stirred him out of unconsciousness.

The three sets of skis behind the Mongoose spun up thin rooster tails of orange-brown dirt as the skiers zigzagged lazily from side to side in the dying sunset further aft. The cold wind was perpetually fierce; the Mongoose had no windscreen to offer so the bitter cold ate Chris up. Justin seemed to be content with it. _When is he ever

not? _Chris thought. Chris could only imagine how the three being dragged along felt. But as if realizing the grueling trek that the ride had become, Justin gently decreased speed. The wind slowly died as Justin slowed ever more. Chris became fully awake after the gentle transition. Justin halted the Mongoose _very _slowly so as to prevent the three skiers from slamming into the back of the ATV. They couldn't stop on a dime like the Mongoose could. He chose a small outcropping to prop the ATV on so he'd have some vantage above the dirt-smothered clay. All skiers snapped out of their bindings and loosened up their boots to walk around and ease their aching leg muscles. They each loosened their jackets a little and drank a little water. Chris looked them over as he stepped off the ride: though they all had thick parkas with hoods and vented, full-width goggles, their faces were wind burntâ€"beat red like lying out in the sun on a more habitable world. Fleeting memories of tropical beaches ran through Chris' head. He instantly forced them away. Thinking about them only angered himâ€"that he'd never get to see them ever again.

Pete had wandered a furlong away, just out of voice range. "What's he doing out there?" Chris asked, his concerned gaze dominating the horizon that Pete lingered on.

"He likes to be alone, kid." Justin said nonchalantly atop the Mongoose. Chris nodded and feigned a smile as if he understood, but Justin knew him well. "In time, you'll understand the need for it." Chris smiled again as Justin lit up a cigarette. Chris' incessant optimism wouldn't last long, Justin probably thought. Everything about this world was a depressant. There was little good in it. Bottled up emotions, paranoia, drug addictions and whatever else that a good society strives to shun was the norm on Traxus IX. Kids and young adults growing up on any other world tasted these things only when they thought about living on the wild side for a night. They had that luxuryâ€"to take chances and make mistakes while they were young, but that was just everyday life here. Perhaps chief among hardships (and strangely among the most benign of them) was pure monotony. Enough time goes by on Traxus IX, everything that can possibly be said under the sun is uttered until there is nothing left to be said anymore, and the memory of a past life, a better life, is just that: a memory. It was better to be alone for as many reasons as one could think, but Justin understood Chris was just a kid.

He had given him enough discourse in the ways of Traxus IX, how to survive here, but the more seasoned of Traxus IX's residents knew the decision to be alone was seldom resultant of external stimuliâ€"it was usually about shame. Shame that you even wound up here in the first place. Shame from the mistakes you madeâ€"just how far you went until there was no turning back. Shame that you could never _go _back.

You most likely wanted to be alone because you were forever broken. There was no going back to the old you.

But in order to just survive, one had to find the good in anything despite such an unforgiving existence. Either that, or perish. That was always an option and Justin had seen many people take it before, the easy one. Justin reminded himself of that. The easy path wasn't always the correct path. And Chris was so young, so innocent, so naïve. "But he's probably just taking a piss." Justin said lightheartedly.

Chris laughed.

Justin flipped a few brown strands of hair away from his face, seeing Chris a little clearer. He assumed Chris was copasetic for the time being; He didn't need any empathy from anyone.

Justin immediately dismounted and checked the fuel gauge, then detethered a canister, opened the spout and gingerly poured its icy-cold contents into the fuel tank to top it off. Bill knelt and kissed a Rosary in the dimming light of the afternoon, his black robe taking on clay stains at the knees. Ken stood idly next to him with a thoughtful gaze. His body language suggested he was less interested in Bill's prayer, and perhaps more so about the time of day.

Justin took notice as he tossed another cigarette to the dirt. "Break's over. We need to get moving."

"Agreed." Ken said. "We've lingered too long."

Justin brought his hands to his mouth and forced a freight train-like whistle that easily permeated the cold winds bearing down on the plain. Pete picked his head up a second later and slowly began his trek back to the Mongoose. Chris scanned all 360 degrees of the horizon, nothing for it to offer. Just one-half steel-grey and one-half orange-brown underneath. It was mind-numbing.

Chris started to think he might have to partake in the drugs that the others were into, if not just to keep sane in the cold, damned world. Chris knew it wouldn't be long until his good nature withered away and he had nothing to look forward to, nothing to offer. From then on, it was kicks to bring about some measure of joy and ecstasy. He was well-educated in the effects of narcotics and excessive alcohol use.

The 'Goose growled to life and settled into its usual, soprano purr as Justin took the helm once again. In dull silence, everyone made ready. "Not much further now." Justin said as Chris took pillion behind him.

Chris nodded as they sped off into the eternal gloom.

-

The last rays of light shone the way.

Darkness was brimming all around except for the bare horizon where light held on just a moment longer, like their Shepard guiding them to Solomon. Like the light's last deed of the day was to ferry them to safety as well as enlightenment. It would see it done, then, diminish into the north.

"Perfect timing." Pete said.

"We should've been here earlier." Justin said with a dry disdain. "Solomon doesn't like unexpected guests at night."

"I'm sure he'll be fine with us." Bill offered.

Once the three skiers--Bill and Pete and Ken--were done unfastening their gear, they made ready to enter. They were huddled in close

around the Mongoose in the drapery of night. Justin hadn't switched off the headlight just yet. He pushed on the ATV until it came about to face Solomon's establishment: a network of steel containers arranged in a way not unlike Justin's own igloo. But there was more than met the eye with this setup.

Everyone was laden with supplies as they walked ever closer.

Solomon's hideout, so to speak, had a distinct advantage. It was _way_ far from anything, even City 17. It had taken the group more than three hours to get there with an average speed of 45 kph. Even if an aggressor had the fuel to travel this far, did they have the will? The supplies?

Furthermore, there were no outcroppings nearby like Justin's location. His igloo had a ledge sprouting up due west, obscuring the plains. Solomon didn't, just wide open space.

And why harass a man like Solomon?

Everyone knew he was cool. He harbored no malice for anyone, much like Bill. Plus, he could give expert advice on what people here loved to do in their permanent pastime: get high.

Which was precisely why Justin ventured here.

They were within knocking distance. Justin rapped on the thick, steel door twice. A dense echo reverberated far into the first chamber and perhaps deeper in as well. He banged on it once more, this time with a metal fuel canister for added noise. Justin looked at everyone: they looked okay. He looked out from the group to the plains surrounding them. Nothing at least as far as he could see in the dust-ridden dusk.

He knocked once more, not liking the position he was in wide out in the open vulnerable.

A clacking sound reverberated through just the door in front. Then another. The sound told something of strength, of steel on steel. Deadbolts.

The door slowly opened with an awful grinding noise. And there, from behind the partition, appeared an elderly man with dark skin, dreadlocked hair, and a clever grin. The eyes, though were something rich and strange. They told of vast knowledge and understanding and content. But the lines of his face told something else: of suffering, endurance and pain. Deep lines of emotional combat. Every detail of the man's appearance was striking, different, and somehow, otherworldly. Everyone waited for him to say something.

"To what d'wI owe d'pleasure of dis fine comp'nee?" he asked in a thick, ancient accent long forgotten.

"Solomon." Justin greeted with a smile. "Are we too late to discuss some business with you?"

"I tink not, mey friend. Why do-wun't you step eenside?"

"Cool. Thanks for seeing us so late." Justin turned to everyone else. "Solomon's iglooâ€¦chain the 'Goose up to it, grab as much shit as you can off it, and get inside."

Everyone complied. They trekked back to the new igloo, and soon everyone entered a new realm.

12. The Voice of the Other

**The Voice of the Other**

Solomonâ€”the peculiar man with dreadlocked hairâ€”led Justin, Pete, Bill, Ken and Chris further into his home, which was somehow an oasis in the cold, never-ending, barren plane of Traxus IX. Different. Altogether strange.

Chris was the last in and shut the door. Solomon called out from over his shoulder, "Please lock d'door if yull be so kyind."

Chris studied the locks, trying to not focus so much on Solomon's peculiar method of speech. It was a simple lever that actuated two deadboltsâ€”one on top and one on bottom. He gave it a firm shove and the two pistons lodged themselves two whole inches into the framework of the steel container, ceiling and floor. Not a bad setup. Quick, robust, and idiot-proof. He caught up to the group and momentarily lost his bearings as he panned his gaze around Solomon's iglooâ€”which was a stark departure from what he remembered Justin's igloo to be. A stark departure from Traxus IX in its entirety.

The interior was packed with plant life. Flora covered walls, floor and hanging from ceiling. There was natural light by way of sconces anchored eye level at steady intervals. A few purple hazes also held partial reign over the lush, jade-tinged ambience â€”UV light sources. Probably to keep the plant life alive seeing as how they were indoors; and Traxus IX offered very little radiance as well. The smell of the place was dank and rich, moisture and minerals heavy in the air. It was rather invigorating to the senses as Chris drew in a deep breath of it. Everyone else did too.

It was as if they transitioned into a new world, a new level of consciousness.

And it was a very welcomed change.

A few more steps inside and everyone was right at ease. "Got a remedy for a case of the broken hearts?" Justin asked aloud.

"For who?" Solomon asked, not looking back.

"For the young one here."

Solomon now turned to face Chris. "New arrival. It happens to us all. But on'lee once, mon. Here, tehk dis." Solomon offered a cup from an outstretched palm.

Chris accepted and peered over the rim. Inside was a clear liquid, tinged jade. He sniffed inside and was rewarded with a heart-warming scent much like sweetened tea. He brought the cup to bear and took a sip. It was exactly as it smelled-sweet and earthy. "It's

good."

"All natural, mon. No syn'tetic shit. Yull feel bettah soon."

"Funny that we're coming here for advice on drugs." Bill quipped.

"Any'ting in moder'ehshyun is good." Solomon replied.

Solomon turned and once more led the way.

Most of the inside was a natural green, save for a few colorful variations here and there where unique plant species laid. Contrasting nicely against the emerald overtones were yellows and pinks and deep, velvety purple. Some grew in translucent enclosures while others blossomed freely in baskets. Solomon led them further into a new container. Humidifiers made a gentle hum with their low-speed fans dispersing water vapor all around. A few pieces of vegetation were sprouting fruits at the ends. Some were ripe, ready to be picked and enjoyed. Other plants had humungous barbs all along their stems, some with giant jaw-like appendages at their ends. At any turn, there could be a different species of plant, one never knowing if it was carnivorous or not. None of them had ever seen a nursery so fertile, so alive.

"Just how in the hell you found the soil to nourish all this, Solomon," Justin began, looking around, "is still a mystery to me."

"I hev mey sources, jest like you." Solomon retorted merrily. "Deh gret ting about d'greenhouse is dat evreh'ting can be renewed."

"Sounds like I need to be taking after you."

"Absolute'lee, mon. You simp'lee must. All'ya need is a little knowledge and a little atten'chyun. Fallow me down."

In the middle of a twenty by twenty steel container, a path was dug into the clay. A set of hand-made stairsâ€"cut cleanâ€"descended an unfathomable distance with what little light there was. Solomon proceeded down, followed by Justin, Bill, Ken, Pete, and then Chris. The steps were solid yet narrow. Everyone stepped cautiously, for the steps were close together as if a child constructed them. But any larger the steps, the more impossible it would be to descend them for the ceiling was obtusely low. A steel-armored cable anchored to it and led the way further down. Solomon held an electric lantern, a ghostly-white glow all around them like a stalking spirit.

"I remember when I helped you build these steps." Justin said, a smile on his face.

"And I do-wun't forget it, mon. Wit'out you, mey life meyt be in shambles."

From the rear of the group, Chris could see an end in sight to these steep steps. The dark landing at the base of the stairs gradually took on brightness as Solomon approachedâ€"holding the lantern high out of his eyesight. The cavernous basement was wide, which was the only dimension to counteract the uncomfortably low ceiling. No one

had to hunch over, but the feeling of confinement was most certainly here. Sconces just like above barely lit the room. At the far wall was a wide bench with various electronic devices, glass beakers and refrigeration units flanking it all.

"How's your generator running, Solomon?" Justin asked.

"Jest fine, tanks to you."

"How are you on fuel?"

"Meyt need some more in a mont."

"I'll be sure to run some by you beforehand."

"Many tanks."

Chris looked around: there was no way out except for the way they came in. The walls were solid clay. But then he looked harder in the dim cave: one wall was darker than the others. He walked over to it. He was startled at what he saw: the wall wasn't black at all, because there was no wall. It was just a pure, pitch-black void, recessing into God only knew what. He extended a hand outward to the darkness and all he felt was air.

"Be careful, mon." Solomon said. "Ver'ee far t'fall." He stepped over to Chris with his lantern, filling the hungry darkness with brave light. For as far as Chris could see downwards, there was nothing. He took a harder look, leaning over the edge oh so carefully: far down below was a silver glimmer winking back at the light in Solomon's hand.

"Water?"

"Yeah." Justin said. "This was the 'oasis' I was telling you aboutâ€”the only place in the world with water. Solomon sits on top of the only aquifer on Traxus Nine."

"You have unlimited water." Chris guessed.

"Ya, mon." Solomon answered.

Chris walked over to a standing trough of water near the middle of the cave, a mesh like grating hovering above it. He ran his fingers over the porous partition and looked to Solomon. "What's this?"

"Dat is d'hydroponics. I grow d'plants here first." Solomon briefly switched on an overhead network of intense ultraviolet light sources. Everyone covered their eyes.

"It burns like a sun." Chris said.

"D'plants require it, mon. I do-won't be down here when d'ere on."

"I see you still got the setup." Justin said. "Are you gonna test the stuff I got?"

"Ya, mon. Over here." Solomon led the group to the far wall where the various test tools lay. On the bench was the typical inventory of an

industrial chemist. Bunsen burners, microscopes, spectrometers, hot plates, cryogenics, everything. Even a small distillery. It was all here. He looked to Chris, standing idly by. "Dis is where d'magic happens, mon. Watch." Solomon reached into a canvass pouch, withdrew a pinch of a strange, powdery substance and threw a clump into a nearby vat of liquid. An immense flame sprouted to the ceiling along with a brief flash of heat. Everyone minus Solomon reared back.

"That was cool!" Chris shouted.

"Ya, mon. And I can already see y'feel bettah." Solomon smiled and patted Chris on the back. He glanced to Justin. "So, now, what is dis you have for me?"

Justin reached into his pocket, withdrew the golden flower and handed it to Solomon by the thick, rubbery stem. "This is it."

"Hmm." Solomon said, peering closely at the strange plant. "Dis is_â€|interesting."

"What is it?" Justin asked.

"Not sure, mon." Solomon sparked to life with wide-eyed glee. He moved to the far side of the bench. "Research." He opened an old, weathered book with care and flipped through the pages. "Dis meyt be what I tink it is, or it meyt not be."

Justin and the others patiently waited.

"Ah!" Solomon shouted. Instantly, everyone gathered around him, hovering over and jockeying for position around the text and illustrations. Solomon showed them the page to what he discovered. "Dis is d'plant you took. See?"

They all looked into the page as Solomon shown his lantern directly upon it.

The picture was of a tangle of vines, lustrous and dark green. There were clusters of flowers stemming off from them, about three centimeters long and broad, bright yellow and trumpet-shaped.

"Dis is supposed to be Trumpet Flower." Solomon declared.

"Supposed to be?" Justin asked, his brow raised.

"Iâ€|I do-wun't know, mon. It is d'best match I have."

"Is Trumpet Flower safe to smoke?"

"Yes, ver'ee small doses. But dis meyt be some'ting entire'lee diff'rent, mon."

"Only one way to find out."

"No. I have a diff'rent way." Solomon reached into a drawer under the desk and pulled out a flask of unknown liquid. It glowed a radioactive solid purple even in the dim light of the cavern. "Give me d'flower again." Solomon said. Justin handed it over. Solomon placed it flat on a ceramic plate in the middle of the bench. "Back

away." he said. "Do-won't breath in d'smoke just yet."

He opened up the flask and poured the strange contents downward onto the flower. Within in a heartbeat, the chemical reaction took place, a fragrant smoke billowing upwards from the bench. It began to rise higher, shrouding the immediate area, the whole group backpedaling in cautious accordence. When the smoke was gone, so was the flower.

"Ah," Solomon declared, "Ver'ee good! D'smoke was grey and the flower is gone. It is safe."

"You're sure?" Justin asked.

"Absolute'lee, mon. Enjoy." Solomon smiled, turned and stowed away his items.

"Thanks, Solomon." Justin said. "So it should work then? How potent will it be? I've been on the hunt for a new kick lately."

"'Twill be plen'tee potent, mon, plen'tee. On'lee ting is here, you do-wun't have enough. Go back to wherever you got dis and get some more. And wey do-won't you tehk some for me too?" he finished with a sly grin.

Chris chimed in from the back of the group, "So what's going to happen when I smoke?"

"Hard to say, mon." Solomon answered. "Evreh mon's exper'yense is diff'rent. Evreh mon for dem'self."

"You're saying that we'll have different trips?" Chris asked. "Like, we'll each have our own perceptions."

"Yesssss." Solomon hissed with wide-eyed excitement. "Yull have your own real'ty." He pointed randomly to each member of the group: "You meyt loff, while he meyt cry. Meybe Justeen get ang'ree. You can neveh know. Dat is wey only afta yee'ahs of navi'geh'teeng d'spirit world, can you staht to learn from dis here magic."

"Basically," Justin said to Chris, "you won't be smoking it with us. You're too youngâ€"for oneâ€"and, you haven't tripped before. This is some strong shit, so maybe another time. No hard feelings, little guy."

Chris shrugged. "That's okay. It sounds a little too much on the wild side for me."

"Now," Solomon said, "you have some tings for me?"

"Yeahâ€|" Justin double timed it back up the stairs and into Solomon's atrium, back downstairs in a flash with a large box in his bear hug grasp . "â€|Two transistor radios, one box of assorted antibiotics, plant feed, ten industrial-grade UV tube lamps, high-voltage ballasts, and several aluminum mounting fixtures. Does that sound about right?"

"Correction, mon."

"Yeah?"

"Make dat _one_ radio."

"I thought you said two."

"Yah, mon. One for me and one for you."

Justin grabbed the other from the box. "Cool, I guess. Why?"

Solomon spoke with a chill in his voice, taking everyone aback. "Ders some'ting happ'ning to dis world. I do-wun't know what it meyt be. But if any'ting should happenâ€|"

"We'll be in touch." Justin finished.

Solomon nodded, his dreadlocked hair bouncing in accordance. He smiled. "Stay d'night, mon. Yull leave come mor'ning."

"Appreacite it, Solomon."

They all hiked it back up the confining set of stairs and wound up back in the nursery. The vapor fans had settled down. The UV lights were less intense than when they first arrived. Everything was on timers. It was the late evening by the group's guess.

"I have man'ee places to sleep." Solomon said. "Pick yours as y'll."

Everyone scrambled around the vast network of steel containers. Soon, everyone was situated. Chris ran to one roomâ€Pete had already snagged a couch there. Chris ran to another roomâ€too lateâ€Ken was already laid out on a cot. Another room and Chris found Justin winding down on a comfortable and spacious bed. Perhaps too spacious the way Chris saw it. "Don't even think about it." Justin said. Chris moved on. Bill occupied the last bed in another room. Chris was out of options.

Then, a voice called out, "You can come dis way."

It was Solomon. Chris reluctantly followed the voice. He found himself in another container, much larger than the others. Solomon was in his own bed, reading old magazinesâ€the stuff dreams here were made of. "Tehk d'sleeping bag, mon. It's quite nice. Nicer than Just'een's, I bet."

Chris knelt down and settled into the cocoon-like resting place. It took him about a whole standard minutes to do so. It was noticeably better than Justin's sleeping bags, but was still not that great. He'd had plenty better before Traxus IX. But he actually felt relaxed. He let his bones mold to the contours of the wooly comfort above him and the padded clay beneath him. As the dim light faded, and his eyes began to grow heavy, he thought about the next night. Chris really didn't see the big deal in getting wasted all the time, but the thought of it was starting to grow on him simply because that's what the others were into. And he dare not befriend anymore.

Soon, he'd get bored. He'd need something to take away the monotony that was inherent in Traxus IX existence.

"Where are you originally from, Solomon?"

"I'm from a world ver'ee far from dis one. A little island called Jamaica."

"You're from Earth! So am I! But how did you wind up here?"

"How I wound up on dis world is still a myst'ry to me, mon. I do-wun't recall."

"That doesn't worry you?"

"Worry?" Solomon said with a laugh, "Why worry, mon? Life it takes you where you go. You're free in dis light. No?"

Chris shrugged.

"Get some sleep." Solomon said.

Chris rolled over on his stomach and grabbed the sides of his pillow. A few soothing breaths and he soon faded into a dream.

The ride back was as uneventful as usually was. Smooth for the most part. They attained a late start on the day, but assumingly Justin wasn't concerned. No one was clocking in today. No work for the worked-to-death. Just fun and play, so Chris hoped. The others needed release more than ever, he felt. Chris actually thought it quite strange; they were on the go for about three hours "almost home" and he didn't feel tired at all. Speaking of which, they made the home stretch; Chris could make out Justin's igloo gaining size in the distance as they approached. Even in the muted luminance of the dead plains, the igloo shone like a beacon of light. They were nearly home, but the Mongoose did not slow.

Now, the ATV and all attached to it flew by the establishment. "What are you doing?" Chris asked over Justin's shoulder.

"Shut up."

Chris clenched his jaw and remained silent.

After a few moments, Chris could make out City 17. He surmised they were going there, but rather than ask a question to be sure, he wisely thought against it. Justin wouldn't be bothered by his queries.

Finally, the Mongoose slowed at the fork in the road. Chris and the others waited with watchful eyes.

The Mongoose darted off towards the cave they holed up in after Justin's most recent altercation with local gang members, namely Jim Carsa.

Justin halted the Mongoose just outside the entrance. Before killing the ATV, he looked in all directions; he scanned every angle until he was satisfied no one was watching. He left for the cave, disappearing into full shadow. Everyone stayed put and waited. Moments later, Justin came jogging out with a whole trash bag full of the Trumpet Flower. "Holy shit!" Pete said. "Are you planning on killing yourself?"

Justin had just about cleared the mouth of the cave when he heard Pete. His lips moved to respond, but movement behind silenced him.

A cluster of rock fragments rained down from the ceiling.

"Watch out!" Chris yelled.

Justin quickened his pace by a few strides and smoothly exited before any of the objects had a chance to hit him. Justin glanced rearward at the fallen debris, smirking, then glanced down to his bag full of hallucinogens before finally responding to Pete, "This will be enough for a whole month." He strode up to the ATV and stowed the bag on the front rack, lashing it down with bungee cord. "Plus, I promised Solomon I'd give him some next time we visited."

Justin hopped aboard and righted the Mongoose back home.

And though not a single one of them noticed, Jim Carsa was at a nearby Admin building watching the whole thing. Justin's Mongoose faded from sight and sound. That's when Jim made his move. He headed for the cave entrance, on a mission to see what it was that Justin Reid pulled from the mines.

It would be his last act as a human being.

Bill, Pete and Ken were content to ski along on Justin's lead. They were nearly home. Pete had pulled from his coat a large bottle of tequila, drinking it straight up with one hand while holding onto the rope with the other. It was quite clear to Chris that Pete didn't enjoy drugs as much as the others, he preferred alcohol. It seemed tonight was different. Pete wanted to take a ride on the wild side tonight with the others.

Suddenly, the Mongoose slowed—eventually came to a stop.

"What's up?" Chris asked as Justin dismounted.

"Drive." Justin simply said.

Chris' eyes shot wide. "You want _me _to drive?"

"Sure."

"Last time I drove, I made you pretty mad."

"I won't get mad this time, now drive."

Chris slid from the rear footpad up to the driver's seat, a sense of exhilaration already swelling inside him. He remembered the last time he drove this powerful ATV, when he plowed right through two criminals that tried to take him off the Mongoose—and do who knows what else to him. The ATV was _very _powerful. It almost sent him staggering back from the overwhelming inertia of lurching forward to far and fast. Even though he almost lost his life that night, it was the most fun he ever had with his clothes on. "Say no more." Chris said.

"Now you've seen me operate this thing a dozen times, so don't ask me questions about it. If you need pointers, then you obviously don't

know how to drive this thing and you aren't ready."

"No, no, I'm ready."

Chris pushed the ignition button and the Mongoose came to life. He goosed the throttle once and felt the masculine vibration surge through the handle bars. He savored the feeling, the sound of the engine, and the smell of the different oils on and inside the Mongoose. He was ready. "I'm ready; get on."

Justinâ€"for onceâ€"took pillion, and they sped off.

The sky was different this late afternoon. Nobody had ever recalled in all their years here that the sky ever took on a red hue. This was a first.

"What the hell is up with the sky?" Ken asked.

"Beats the fuck outta me." Justin said, voice trailing off.
"Increased solar activity mixing with the ionosphere, I don't know."

"I don't like it." Bill said. "Let's go inside."

"Yeah, yeah." Justin said. "Soon enough. Chris, go get some water and bring it inside." Justin stepped into the igloo.

Bill approached Chris before he went to get the water. "How did you like driving? Did you get a good feel for it?"

"It was fun! I wanna do it again!"

"Good. I suspect you will."

"Why do you think Justin's being less mean to me lately?"

"He is not mean to you; he is just very picky. He wants you to learn the ways of this world and how to survive here. Inevitably, you will come of age. So, we think it is the right thing to prepare you."

"How can I make Justin my friend?"

Bill thought for a moment, then knelt down next to Chris. "To have a friend is to be a friend."

"But I've always tried to be nice, to do what he asks."

"That you have."

"So why does he still talk down to me?"

"You are still so young, and you are new to this world. Don't misunderstand him. Don't take things personally."

"That'sâ€"impossible, Bill."

"I know it's hard to understand him. That is something we all have in common, but over time you'll see that he is justâ€"very set in his

own ways. Just keep doing what you're doing. He means you no harm. He's just trying to toughen you up."

"So how do you get by? Everyone else is so cruel but you are like everyone's friend."

"That's because I am." Bill said. "I try to be a friend and mentor to anyone willing to listen."

"Thanks, Bill."

"Anytime, Chris."

The sun had fallen.

The sky was no longer blood-red. It was pure dark now, a blanket of eerie blackness over the barren plains.

The scene was different in the perfect safety of Justin's igloo. They were surrounded on all sides by steel and tons of clay. The only door was locked. The interior was bright with fluorescent lighting and Justin had a shotgun in the heater room if things got nastyâ€"if unwanted individuals wanted inside.

The atrium was rather jovial; all of them huddled around the dirt floor in a rough circle waiting for Justin to start getting the night ready. "Alright, it's gonna be a wild night tonight." Justin said. "Some ground rules: no oneâ€|repeatâ€|_no one_â€|is to go outside until tripping time is overâ€"for any reason _whatsoever_. We have all the water and food we need for the night. If you have the need to drain the liz or drop the kids off at the pool, go to the latrine."

"What?!" Pete shouted. "The latrine? I haven't used that pipe-in-the-ground for years, and I'm not about to use it now."

"Then I guess you're holding it in." Justin said. "Because whoever I catch going outside, stays outside. It's too dangerous and you fucking know that. I don't want anyone opening that door. Now, rule two: don't play around with the shotgun. If I catch anyone doing that, I'll blow their fucking face off myself. I'm fucking serious. Rule three: it's all just a game, remember that. No matter what happens, you're in control. Whatever you see and hear, don't let it get to you. Enjoy the hallucinations but don't let them own you. I've been through this shit before. It's fun only when you feel good. If you aren't feeling well, find someone. It makes all the difference in the world to talk and share your experiences, believe me. Any questions?" Justin looked around the room. "Good. We can begin."

Justin dumped out the bag of flowers over a small, plastic bag. He started with the largest one and began tearing little fleshy bits from the pedals. He repeated these motions for all the rest of the bulbous flowers.

Everyone's eyes were on Justin's handy work. They all mentally prepared themselves for the night to come. But Chris wouldn't be involved directly. He'd be a spectator. It was actually a good thing, too. Because there would be one sane person that night to keep order

over things, to make sure nothing got too crazy. Chris would be the voice of reason in a chaotic experience. He watched Justin dig in. "You know, I think I've finally figured out what is really wrong with this place." Chris said as they all sat Indian style in the dirt floor of the atrium.

"Oh yeah?" Justin asked, "what's that?"

"It's the drugs. You said it yourself, Justin, that this place started to go downhill as soon as the smugglers and dealers arrived long ago. They got too greedy. Plus, drugs fuck you up. Before that, this place was doable. People are all moody and touchy now. They kill over material things. And the business deals that drive it all, the black market goods and illegal services floating from one part of the galaxy to the nextâ€"it all comes through here."

"No." Pete said. "You're wrong. It's the planet itself. Traxus Nine is a biohazard altogether. Let's look at the facts here. This place got its start on heavy industryâ€"ideal place with the elements under the soil and the location in the galaxy. This cold, dead sphere emits more carbon than any other colony in the galaxy. And we're not that old of a colony! Remember that Traxus Nine was founded right before bulk shipment to the outer colonies was even a dream. So that means the inner colonies had all this time to smother themselves with all kinds of chemicals. But look at us now: it would take Earth or Reach fifty years to catch up with the kind of greenhouse effects we're producing. And they are far less industrialized than us! Plus, we have no equalizer here like good soil or plant life. At the rate we're going, this planet will be unlivable in less than a century. So no, you're wrongâ€"the chemicals in drugs could never match up to the chemicals already in the air."

Justin added, "How about everything that both of you just said? Everything wrong here adds up, andâ€" "

"â€"And we're just perpetuating that." Bill said with an uncharacteristic, sardonic humor.

"What are you talking about?" Pete asked.

Bill replied, "We're smoking up or binge drinking every day. And we've done nothing to make our lives any better."

"But for good reason." Justin interjected again. "We don't have the power to change anything anymore. THI has this planet," he said, looking to Pete, "as well as the people in it," he said, looking to Chris, "by the balls. And dealing will still take place here; THI doesn't give a shit about what this place has become. Might as well live it up while we fall from grace." Justin finished tearing up the last of the petals of the strange flower, stuffing them into a large water pipe.

"There's no way that _I'm _running away." said Pete.

"That's because there's no other place to go." Bill retorted. "We've got it the best here in Justin's house."

"Well, duh, Father." Pete said cruelly. "â€"So how does a priest find the moral currency to be both a man of God as well as a weed-smoker?"

"I am not a saint." Bill said with an air of a teacher. "But I can strive to educate people in the way of good deed and forgiveness. We are all brothers here, are we not?"

Justin didn't offer any answer as Bill regarded all inhabitants of his dwelling. Justin immediately hopped on the bacteria-infested sofa, waiting for the argument to die. Just as quickly as Justin changed his seating, Ken immediately shied away from the question, looking dubiously to the clay beneath his feet. Pete however, said, "I honestly couldn't tell you, Billy boy. That's a question for someone who gives a shit."

"You should give a shit." Bill said, a fire now in his eyes.

"No one ever gave a shit about me." Pete retorted.

"And that is a shame." Bill replied. "But you must look past your own misfortune from time to time."

"So why the sudden condescending approach tonight? You're a little more pompous than usual."

"Because we are all travelers in this life. By the graces of God, we could be in others' shoes, living out there instead of in here."

"Then let's smoke one up for all those poor bastards." Justin said with authority. "C'mon. It's go time. No chicken shits allowed in here tonight."

"Fuck it." Pete said.

Everyone else—minus Chris—gathered around the water pipe.

"Here goes." Justin announced. He retrieved a butane lighter from his jacket pocket and brushed some of the sugar-fine dirt from himself. He stretched out his arms briefly to loosen his outer clothing and brought the lighter to bear down on the bowl-full of crushed Trumpet Flower—resting torn and broken just inside the pipe. He sparked it.

The bunched up flower fragments seemed to invite the small flame inward. They hissed and crackled and popped as Justin placed suction on the business end of the bong. Smoke from the combusted flower billowed up the tube towards Justin's open mouth like a witch's evil concoction. He inhaled it like a champ, not letting any of it go to waste before passing it immediately to Pete—sitting right next to him. Pete eyed Justin sidelong, watching his face flush slight red as he held in the smoke. He held it in. Kept holding it in. About ten seconds later and Justin finally let it all dissipate into the ambience.

"Thatta boy!" Pete said as he prepared to light up.

* * *

><p>Everyone had multiple turns at the pipe. The contents of the bowl were used up, nothing but blackened, charred remains of the once soft and yellow petals. The room had grown quiet, no conversation created.

No one would ever think anything had changed by looking at Pete Barker. He was sprawled out on the cot, looking neutral and apathetic as ever. But looks were always deceiving. He definitely felt the effects of the flower. He lied still in the cot as brisk blurs raced around the room. His head spun with the blurs—he involuntarily giggled as some of the blurs whisked past his bare feet.<p>

Throbbing tickled the inside of Justin's ears. It was rather annoying, but at times it could also be quite interesting. In fact, some of the time it was rather soothing. Nevertheless, the noise and the feelings it brought on were still strange. Not a possession of his in the igloo could cause such a reverberation. The heater was off, even if it was capable of making any more noise than it was worth. And no one was moving; they were all lethargic and immobilized either on the floor or on a molded out furniture piece. This piqued Justin's attention. As he looked around, the thudding in his ear diminished.

Then, faint whispers could be heard. At first, Justin was unconcerned, indifferent about what the voices said. He was in wonderland at the moment, a wash of vivid colors undulating all about the lifeless, grey walls. He let himself slip into fantasy. He hadn't a care in the entire world. All Justin knew was that someone was talking, or many people were because there seemed to be more than one voice. Pete or Bill, or whoever, it didn't matter. But—the cacophony of sound was indeed ever more strange the longer the voices rattled on. Even though he tried to put a finger on it, his mind was perpetually occupied by the other sights and sounds in the room, so vivid and splendid, various events tugging at his awareness all at once.

Justin saw shapes invert themselves, swimming into each other and falling to the floor. He felt the whole world turn upside down and let himself become immersed in vertigo. He smiled crazily and let go of reality, sinking deeper into the netherworld of his mind's wildest impossibilities.

As one with himself, as all the colors and shapes swirling all around him coalesced into a whimsical galaxy of bizarre amalgamation, he heard all the whispers in the background—so far off—coalesce into a solitary voice just as all the sights had. The voice became singular, each distinct identity now joined together. Then, silence.

Total, curious silence.

Not even the laughs of Bill or Pete or Ken were audible as their lips moved.

All the imagined sights and the sounds that took the form of sights shattered and fell to the floor with a sudden violence. Looking down, Justin saw the creations of his imagination simply disintegrate. Now, he saw only the bare igloo. No longer the pleasant fusion of color and light, but just reality again. His trip had abruptly ended—but nothing was still real. The periphery of his vision was stained with blood, slick and crimson, the smell of mineral in the air aloft. The lone voice came back and started to speak, its source seemingly far off, yet close to home as well, as if Justin existed everywhere in an instant. A sudden dread resultant of nothing in particular sprang up

from inside him. The visual equivalent of moldy lemons suddenly appeared all around him, the sting of stomach acid registering in his mind, calling him back to reality. But he was too far gone, now. He tried with all his will to reject the omnipotent feeling he possessed. Tried to shun away the voice in his head, but it fought back with infinite ferocity. It overpowered him and all his free will. The voice was him, here to stay, and no way for Justin to pretend it didn't exist. It spoke...

The odds tipped and stars aligned,
>_foreshadowing of your tomb
>_Blissful sleep 'till ends of time,
>_corpses shift and offer room
>_Join the amity of us,
>_and never exist alone
>_Come down, offer up your fleshâ€|
>_this place will become your HOME!_

Justin feared for his life.

The voice staggered him; he was a tuning fork struck against a steel cage. He willed the voice away, but it echoed off the walls of his skull, swaying back and forthâ€"in and out of his cognizance. Now he fought, harder than ever in his life to drown out the voice with his own thoughts, his own whispers. This time, to his great luck, it receded into the background noise of the igloo from whence it spawned. He did something right. Faint echoes of it remained, of what just chilled him more than the eternal winter of Traxus IX itself.

He was out of breath, his heart pounding between his ears. But it all slowly came down from boiling to a mere simmer. He blinked his eyes and the blood faded away from his vision. The walls expanded and contracted with him, perfectly in sync as his breathing slowed. His veins receded back under his skin. He was okay now. He was safe.

He slumped over and blacked out.

13. Hangover

Hangover_

Justin awoke.

And he was completely frozen where he lay. This was usually because of the cold; any other day, and the cold would be the culprit. But it was more so because of the terrible feeling manifesting inside him.

It was rotten. He felt itâ€"inside and outâ€"as if covered in amniotic fluid, so silkily disgusting. He wanted to get up, ride the Mongoose as fast as it would carry him to the city, rush into the community showers and just stand there for an hour. He'd rinse and scrub and wash and do it some more until his skin peeled, he felt so dirty. But his mind was numb, far more than any other time in this mind-numbing existence of Traxus IX. So numb, he couldn't move.

What was perhaps more horridly strange, was that he hadn't known anything of last night after the strange voice entered his head. He

blacked outâ€"because he certainly didn't remember how he found his way to the couch and fell asleep. He'd had occasions like this before, though. Yet somehow he always remembered his wild, narcotic experiences later on down the line. After moments and hours of monotonous and wearisome work at the factory, his mind would eventually rest on the prior night's happenings. Though this time, he was afraid the memory was gone.

He was always supposed to be in control. Always had been.

And he still couldn't move. He felt angry at the mere notion of pitying himself, staying frozen any longer. It only barely outweighed his fear.

He rose out of the couch, some of the bacteria-ridden moisture clinging to his clothes upon his departure. He sensed that maybe the igloo had grown colder; how rare indeed because Traxus IX was quite stable in its morbid climate. However, he was dread-cold right down to the bones. He could barely feel his face. He made for the outer door to check the sun and check the sky. Maybe the cloud layer had descended more than usual for some crazy reason. Noâ€"he stopped. Hunger churned inside him. He had to eat something. But there was hardly anything in this shelter that could offer him the kind sustenance he required. It felt as though he just emerged from hibernation. Noâ€"he should be going to the heater room right about now, being on the verge of hypothermia. But something overrode that instinct. Cognitively, he knew he was in deep shit and had to act fast. But emotionally, he was perfectly fine. Something was indeed wrong, even though he was perfectly content to let it stay this way.

His mind and body was all over the place. He didn't know what to do with himself. He knew it would feel good to step in the heater room, or even to go outside to get some water. Or both. Orâ€"none of the options he considered. Anything was fine at this point, but also unacceptable as well.

He paced back and forth across the dirt floor of the atrium, so fast that he kicked up dust that rose halfway up his body. He could feel warmth circulating at leastâ€"it just barely registered in his cognizance. One mission accomplished. But he couldn't even begin to put a finger on whatever else was going on inside his mind. Or body. Or wherever the hell this feeling resided. He had never felt so insecure.

Then, he rememberedâ€|

"Justin," he said unto the air around him, "didn't you just take a trip down the rabbit hole last night?" He smiled, and the memory of Solomon's hideout surged back into his mind. The trip across the open plains back to the igloo, and the guys all sitting in a circle and getting wasted together off this strange, golden flower. "Yes, you did!" he replied to himself. He smiled again.

Clarity, Justin now held. It was all just a bad experience, one of many he had. But this was by far the strangest. That would explain his current state of mind.

It was confirmed. Nothing to worry about.

All in my head.

He breathed easy.

In Justin's perfect moment of lucid transparency, a sudden convulsion sprang in him from the gut up. A gag reflex completely owned his whole body. He just barely caught it before he ran to the door, massive hiccups in his windpipe.

Once outside, he let the flood gates open and vomited all over the dust-smothered clay.

He heaved and gagged, completely out of breath for nearly half a minute while stomach acid and bile and undigested food poured from his open mouth to the deck. An immense dry heave followed and he was almost passed out from lack of oxygen. He remained in a pseudo stance, thoughâ€”hunched over with the weight of his torso buttressed into the knees through his arms. Once able to take in air, he stood up. It felt like he was ten pounds lighter. He felt able to walk to the water pallet around back. He felt capable of running two marathons back-to-back. That's when he doubled over again and let loose one last, triumphant volley of chunky fluid gushing to Traxus IX.

Once completely drained, he caught his breath until he felt whole again. He stood upâ€”|

â€”|And then a torrent of voices surged into his mind, ringing his ears with screams of agony and horror.

"Ahhhhh!" he screamed into the cold, lifeless plains.

They kept coming and wouldn't stop, filling Justin's ears with pure horror. He screamed again. The noises were so loud, it actually started to hurt.

Then, all at once, it stopped. Justin gasped for air once again.

There was just silence and a gentle, cool breeze all around. Justin scanned the horizon: nothing. Not a soul in sight. Nothing around for miles that could make that kind of racket. Yes, it was inside his head. _I'm going crazy._ Justin thought. _No, you're not going crazy._ _It's just the flower. Just the flowerâ€”|_

He glanced all about once more: there was still nothing except the nothingness of Traxus IX. He sauntered into the igloo and looked around: everyone was still asleep, either on the floor or in a cot. Not one person had woken up besides Justin, and not even after he screamed at the top of his lungsâ€”twice. Something strange was happening.

He went to the cot where Pete lied and shook the frame. All Justin got was a moan and rapid eye movement; Pete was in a dream and was lifeless for the time being. It would be even harder to wake the bastard up than times before after last night. Justin moseyed over to a sleeping bag where Ken slept. He shook Ken himself but he was unresponsive as well. That left Bill and Chris, next to one another in other sleeping bags. He looked at both their faces. Justin would rather talk to Bill than Chris. Bill was Justin's closest and most

trusted friend and surely the best listener out of any. He would understand, or at least try to.

He shook Billâ€”no response. Againâ€”no response.

"The fuck?" Justin whispered to himself.

"â€”What was all that yelling?" Chris asked, startling Justin.

"Jesus, kid. You scared me."

"Were you yelling at someone outside?"

"No. I stubbed my toe."

"In your boots?"

"It was before I put my boots on." Justin took a seat on the dirt floor, avoiding Chris' eyes for the moment. "How come you're not asleep?"

"Your scream woke me up."

Justin nodded, the horror in his eyes barely kept a secret by the hard lines of his face.

"What's with the others?" Chris asked.

"I don't know. I tried to wake them, but they are out of it."

"You tried to wake each one of them?"

"â€”Yeah."

"Wellâ€”that's not good. They could be sick from the flower you guys smoked up. We should check them."

"Right, I'll take their pulses." Justin ran over to Ken first. He was zonked out on the floor, his blonde hair draped half over his limp face. Justin could see a white spot where Ken's drool dried on the wool material from his open mouth. Justin knelt down and placed his index and middle finger in between Ken's jaw and necklineâ€”the carotid artery. Justin slowed his breathing and vested all his concentration into his two fingers. There was a pulseâ€”slow and weakâ€”but there was a pulse. "Ken's good." Justin said, making his way to Bill.

"Pete's good." Chris said.

He checked Bill's pulseâ€”good. Slow and weak, but nevertheless present.

Justin stood up and scratched his scalp in confusion.

"What's wrong?" Chris asked.

"Did Pete have a weak pulse?"

"You know what? I thought I noticed he did." Chris said. "The

others?"

Justin nodded. "Slow and weak."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not entirely sure. But check your pulse for me."

"Okay." Chris said warily. He did so and said, "Feels normal to me."

Justin immediately checked his own. He let his arm fall to his side a moment later.

"And?" Chris asked. He could now make out the haunted look in Justin's gaze. "Like the others. You think it's from the flower?"

"Couldn't imagine what else it'd be from."

"Should we consult Solomon?"

"No. Too far of a drive. I'm gonna go to the factory to get some medication, see what's wrong."

"I wanna go."

"We're all going."

* * *

><p>So far, the plan wasn't working as conceived. The others were in a coma-like slumber.<p>

"We'll just have to wait for them, then." Justin said.

Justin and Chris brought in water and inventoried what non-perishables there were in Justin's meager stockpile. After one whole standard hour of these activities, the others slowly awoke, one by one.

Justin and Chris watched them, perfectly silent and observant. They were groggy and disoriented as they left their places of rest. Pete nearly fell over as he negotiated standing himself up from the cot. Justin and Chris took notice and idly stood watch as the rest of them moseyed around the igloo, seemingly lost and confused, and even unaware to Justin and Chris' presence. Slowly but surely, they picked up the pace and either brushed teeth, put on heavier clothes or did whatever else they did in their monotonous routines.

"How'd you guys sleep last night?" Justin asked, his voice easily permeating the conglomerate of steel walls.

For what seemed moments later, each one of them—"Bill, Pete and Ken"—worked their way to the atrium where Justin and Chris stood firm.

Two men stared at three across the room, and vice versa. Another moment went by.

"I sleptâ€|okay." Pete finally said.

"Same here." Bill replied.

Ken shrugged. "So-so."

"Just like that?" Justin asked the three of them. "No tosses or turns?" They each shook their head. "â€|How do you feel now?"

No answer came for about a whole minute. "â€|What?" Bill asked.

"I said , ?"

"â€|I'm fine." Bill replied. His deep, throaty voice was heavier than usual and very groggy. Justin even detected an uncharacteristic hint of irritation. That wasn't Bill.

Justin then looked to Pete. His face was puffy like he'd just gone three rounds with a pride fighter. "And you?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Pete said. He walked off into the heater room.

"What's up, Ken?" Justin asked, hesitant to hear the answer.

"I feelâ€|okay. I guess."

"You guess." Justin confirmed, nodding bitterly. He walked around to the couch and sat down, eyeing some comic books on the floor. "I'm fine and I guess doesn't sound like definitive answers to me." Justin declared, his voice even louder.

Chris took a seat on the floor, nervous about something in the air. Justin's voice seemed to make the metallic walls ring. Tension was building. He could see it on everyone's faces, in everyone's bodies. A cloud of negative energy.

"I'll say it again," Justin said, "I'm not very convinced here."

"What the fuck do you want to hear from us?" Pete said from another room. "That we need you to hold our fucking hands? You gonna make us a bed-and-breakfast?"

"Whatever." Justin said, and walked outside.

"Where are you going?" Chris whispered.

"To get some water. I'm fuckin' thirsty, okay?"

"Okay. All I did was ask."

Justin opened the door firmly and stepped outside. He was back in a moment later with two water bottles.

* * *

><p>"Everyone get ready for work. We're all going in today."<p>

To Justin's great content, there was no argument.

Everyone was slow in getting ready. Much slower than usual. And they were usually pretty slow.

Justin only had to splash some water on his face and put on another overcoat. Chris, much the same. A quick brush of his teeth and he met Justin outsideâ€”prepping the 'Goose for the ride to the city. One by one, Pete and Bill and Ken sauntered out of the igloo with their ski equipment. They clumsily donned their goggles, gloves, boots and warm clothes. As if their first time. Justin actually congratulated himself on the inside for putting up with their movementsâ€”they were like molasses going uphill. It seemed impossible for them to take any longer. But eventually, they snapped into their bindings and Justin immediately darted off.

Justin wondered how long it would take them to start blowing chunks on the fast-moving ground beneath them. Not long.

Ken spewed his insides out directly in front of him. Much of the matter wound up on his boots and shins. Some overspray caught Pete next to him, who didn't even have the will to react. A wince was all that could be detected over Justin's shoulder. Pete hadn't bothered to clean himself. They were definitely somewhere else and far from lucid. Justin slowed to a brief stop and swiveled to face Bill, Pete, and Ken.

"Look," Justin said with a sting of annoyance, "are you fuckers gonna start dropping like flies if I continue to the city?"

"Since when did you ever start giving a shit, Justin?" Pete responded in kind. "How do you even know we're gonna drop the rope?" Pete listed to one side where he stood.

"I don't know much of anything right now." Justin fired back. "Which is why we all need to give each other some assurance."

"What the fuck for? You want to go to the factory, I think everyone else does too. So just carry on and drive, dude!"

"I'm just saying...don't keep going if you can't even stand up. If we're gonna ride, we're gonna ride hard and fast so we can get some meds, some antibiotics or something. We need to recover from whatever the hell this is, because I think this might be pretty serious."

"Now, now, Justin," Pete barked, "you're gonna scare our resident holy-man."

* * *

><p>Justin slowed the ATV to a halt again after another mile. "How long until this goes away?" Chris asked as Justin dismounted.<p>

"Like Solomon said, you never know. Everyone is different. Hell, any one of them could still be in another world. Shit, I'm still pretty hammered."

Chris swallowed. He didn't like the sound of that.

Justin worked his way to the three skiers, two of which were hunched over and out of breath, Bill and Ken. "You guys gonna be able to make it the rest of the way?"

No answer.

"Pete." Justin said.

Pete was looking straight into Justin, but his eyes were squinted, like slits, nearly shut. A grin was all that could be discerned from Pete's mental state. He was absolutely delirious. "I can fuckin' make it." he nevertheless said.

"Fucking better, 'cause if I have to turn around at the home stretch for you, I _will _drag your ass all the way back. Lazy bastard."

Chris stood up and left the Mongoose and walked towards them, slowly. Something was happening between Justin and the rest of them. The wavelengths were off. Something was brewing. A fight? It was more than probable, Chris thought. The remains of the flower in their system were doing something. Amplifying their already pent-up aggression. It had swelled in all of them for who knew how long. The only source of tranquility was Bill. But he was on the verge of blackout himself. If Chris had to defuse a situation, he'd need him. As if to confirm Chris' suspicions, Bill lost balance and dropped to the dirt.

"Stand him up!" Justin ordered Pete.

"What?"

"I said get him on his feet!"

"Why are you asking me?!"

"Because you're standing right next to him. Now pick him up before I beat your ass!"

"Fuck off, Captain!"

Justin dove into Pete.

Chris' eyes widened as they scrambled over one another, dirt and chunks of clay thrown everywhere as they wrestled. Justin gained the upper hand and was now on top of Pete, and he didn't waste a single heartbeat, reached back with bawled fists and threw hard body shots into Pete's ribs. His thick parka rippled and dented as Justin pummeled away. "Stop!" Chris shouted. He jumped into the fray and grabbed a hold of Justin's arm as he was about to throw a right hook to the jaw. It would've put Pete out of commissionâ€"maybe for good.

Next, all Chris knew was that he was on the ground, totally out of breath. He sat up and looked aroundâ€"fuzzy. Slowly, he regained his bearings and found Justin back on top of Pete, swinging away again. Bill was still passed out on the ground while Ken was in another world, maybe pretending that none of this was happening. The pure horror of the situation had somehow eluded all of them except Chris.

He ran over to the Mongoose and made for a metal fuel canister still mounted on the chassis from their trip to Solomon's. He sorted out a full one and unfastened it. He hefted it with all his might and ran over to the squabble. It looked like Pete's defenses were all but vanquished. He could no longer cover his face and skull. And Justin was now wound up for a massive strike, clubbing his hands together high above his head for smash-down blow to the forehead.

That's when Chris lifted the canister high over his own head and brought it slamming down onto the crown of Justin's. The ring from the metal-to-bone contact was louder than a firecracker. Justin slumped over.

And Chris began to cry.

14. Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis

Justin came to. He opened his eyes and was met with a solid canvass of steel-grey. The clouds. He lay there for just a moment, then sat up. Too fast. A throbbing pain invaded his brain and his face winced the hardest it ever had in all his pain-filled life. After a few breaths, he could make out the sound of a young kid sobbing nearby—"Chris.

He looked around and found Chris sitting up against the Mongoose, streams of tears running down his face. Then, Justin suddenly remembered what happened before he woke up. It all came rushing back to him at the mere sight of the young boy. "Oh my God!" Justin yelled, running over to Pete.

His whole body was lifeless, not a hint of thought or emotion on his face. "Is he dead?" Justin asked, hesitant to hear the answer from Chris.

There was no answer, then Justin ran over to Chris and shook him about the shoulders. "Wake up, kid! Is he dead?!"

Chris picked his head up, his angry gaze meeting Justin's. "No." he said maliciously. "But he almost was."

"You hit me on the head." Justin said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Don't _ever _thank me. I wasn't doing you a favor. I did it to save Pete's life, you fucking prick!"

Justin suddenly lost all the weight in his legs and stammered back before executing a half-controlled fall to the dirt, eyes ever on Chris the whole time. Justin lost all his nerve as Chris' unforgiving stare bored evermore into him. He looked away. "I didn't even know what was going on. I wasn't in control at all. Only now do I see it happening. It wasn't me!"

"Right." Chris said, mockingly. "It was the flower. What's next—" "the devil made me do it'?"

"I'm serious." Justin got up and ran over to Pete once more. Chris

followed him, a fuel canister still in his hands just in case. Justin scoffed. "Put it down, I'm not gonna do anything. And you couldn't take me if you tried."

Chris reluctantly relented. Though, he did not stray more than a meter away from his only weapon.

Justin knelt down next to Pete and rolled him from his fetal position. Justin gasped as Pete's face came into full view.

"Yeah, you fucked him up alright. Nice going, you fucking twat waffle."

"It's not that bad." Justin said. "He'll recover from this. He's been through worse."

"Oh _yeah_? How worse?"

"Try going three rounds with a Covenant death squad for a night. Then, you can talk."

Chris said no more.

"Pete, can you hear me?" Justin said. "Pete."

He shook him.

"What's going on?" A confused Pete replied. He was vaguely coherent, but far from his normal bearings. He was clearly delirious with that same smile on his face, like it was permanently etched on there. "Where are we? Why am I covered in dirt?"

"You had a hard fall." Justin said sheepishly. He avoided Chris' eyes for the moment. "You and me, kid, we got into a little disagreement. Pretty physical, but we're okay. Can you stand?"

"Maybe. Actually, I'd rather not. Where's the cot? Just get me to the cot."

Justin laughed. And Chris actually joined him in it, strangely to Justin's content. "We're a little too far to walk to the cot, bud. But I tell you what: if you can stand and get on your skis, we can rest it up at the city. Hot shower, Tylenol, shave, haircut, maybe even a drink if I pull the right strings. What say you to that?"

"â€¦Fuckin'-A." Pete replied.

"Fuckin'-A it is!" Justin said, laughing as he helped stand Pete up.

-

"I _thought_ you were gonna kill him." Chris said into the wind over Justin's shoulder.

The ride went on in relative peace as they closed distance to the city. It had taken a few moments to wake up Bill and Ken, but they eventually joined and skid behind. And it was a good thing Bill and Ken, especially Bill, did not witness the fight. In their current

state, it might've sent them into a bad place. And it might've made Bill question his belief in the group, maybe even human nature as a wholeâ€|the way Justin was laying into Pete.

"I can't believe what that flower does, man." was all that Justin could muster in response. "I blacked out."

"We have to get rid of it."

"Well, yeah. Obviously."

Justin glanced over his shoulder, first at Chris and then to Pete and the other two. "How are they doing?"

"We should stop for a break. They look like they need it."

Justin complied and stopped. There was not much further to go. Any other day and Justin would continue on no matter what anyone had to say. But he was now in a debt after what had transpired a few klicks back. He dismounted the ATV after Chris. Pete was just a few meters back, taking off his gloves and rubbing his sore shins and thighs as they always did at break time. Justin extended a hand unto him, said, "No hard feelings, buddy?"

Pete stared at it for a moment. He smiled an instant later, a rare sight from him. "You mean to tell me that Reidâ€|_the _Justin Reidâ€|is offering apologies. Oh, you fuckin'-A bet your ass I'm gonna take it."

"Wellâ€|" Justin said, his bare hand still held aloft "â€|take it!"

"No. I'm gonna wait just a little longer so I can milk this for all it's worth."

"I'm gonna take it away at the count of three, douche-bag."

"And I'm gonna wait until your arm gets heavy."

"One."

"I know it's getting heavy."

"â€|Two."

"You're gonna drop it before three."

"â€|Thrâ€|"

Pete reached out and snatched his hand before Justin could retract it. Pete shook it up and down for both of them. "Three."

Justin smiled. "Yeah, happy now?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Right." He smiled unto the spiteful plains, as if smiling into the mouth of a monster. "Is everyone done? Can we get going now?"

-

"Man, you guys are fucking weird." Chris said as Justin darted off once more. They were a mere klick away from the city outskirts.

"Drastic experiences drastically bring you closer to your friends."

"Where did you hear that?"

"A wise man."

"Solomon, I bet. That's the only wise man around here. And Bill, too."

"I've said it before, Chris, you are one intuitive bastard. I think you'll do just fine at Traxus IX."

"Eh." Chris said.

The rest of the ride went on in silence, until they passed through the outer sanctum, through the tunnel, and finally into the inner courtyard.

-

Justin and Chris dismounted. The three skiers snapped out of their bindings, carrying their equipment as they walked towards the main bay doors of the factory floor. They parted slowly like Pete walked. They entered and were met with the same scene they had witnessed during all their time at Traxus IX. Dreary white light high above, endless conveyor belts with grimy and unrefined metal scraps strewn all over them, and zombie-like workers slaving away as usual. Instantly, Justin and those with him assumed the appropriate mental state that safeguarded one's sanity in such a place. They became zombies themselves. You dared not work hard; you'd only be rewarded with more of the same. It never changed.

But today was a day much different than all other days. Except for Chris.

Justin was first in, followed by Chris and everyone else. They stowed what few personal belongings they owned and sauntered over to a work station. Justin claimed a space at the MF inspection station and quietly sat for a moment. After staring off into space, he switched on a powerful, downward-looking UV lamp. He slowly retrieved a 200X magnifying monocle and began his inspections. And though no one would notice it, there was a lot on his mind. He stole a glance about the bay: nothing out of the ordinary, not even Jim Carsa hoping to make an unwanted appearance. But Carsa was the least of his worries now.

Ever since this voice entered Justin's head, he hadn't felt right at all, both physically and mentally. The flower was surely the culprit. But how on Traxus IX was a voice stuck in his head?

He knew the sound of his own voice and this was not it. Presently, it was barely audible, below even a whisper, but surely there, tugging at his wits. Every time an overhead light pierced his eye, every time

a stranger glanced his way or every time a metal shard grazed his skin, the voice would intensify. It knew him all too well.

-

Justin left for a break room at mid-shift.

Normally, he could go twelve or more hours of work just fine and not even grab a snack. But today was a day unlike any other. This voice ebbed and flowed in his conscienceâ€"in and out, in and out, like the swelling undertow beneath a continental shelf. Though just a whisper melded in with the background hum of machinery at the moment, it had grown unbearable. He thought about seeking help, maybe talking to someone, but they'd probably think he was just crazy. Suck it up, they would say. This is Traxus IX; no one gives a shit if you're sad in this world.

At any rate, he walked on over to one of the rooms behind one-way mirror glass. He needed a change of pace, maybe. Something to take his mind off the voice, for it found a way inside his head despite how busy he kept himself with the day's duties. He reached for the door, opened itâ€"and found Pete Barker sitting down at a table with head in hands. Was he sleeping? Justin wouldn't have been surprised.

But no. He was resting. His eyes were open. Justin only caught the side of his face, but he could clearly tell something about Pete was amiss. His cool and smug gaze was off. Was it just Justin's current state of being? Did it have to do with the scuffle the two of them got into earlier? Justin wondered if Pete remembered any of it, and if he did, would he hold it against him?

"What's up, Pete? Needed a break?"

Pete picked up his head and looked squarely at him.

Now Justin could see itâ€"the haunted gaze that Justin himself had felt ever since he awoke. Just as quickly as Pete saw Justin, though, he panned away, maybe a look of regret behind his eyes from what Justin could gather. Was Pete feeling the same as Justin?

Reid couldn't jump to any conclusions yet. He was still far too inebriated to even perform basic arithmetic. How could he assume anything about anyone at this point?

"Not in the mood to at least answer me?"

"Fine." he said annoyingly. He looked back up to Justin, still standing stoic over him "â€"I guess."

"What are you doing?"

"Taking a break, like you said."

"Long fuckin' day, eh?"

Pete nodded and continued staring off into space immediately after, squinted eyes and parsed lip as he zoned out in the quiet of the break room. All to himself.

Justin studied Pete discretely for a moment, then said, "I've been feeling pretty shitty ever since I woke up. How about you?"

He nodded again, seemingly annoyed every time Justin broke silence.

Justin took yet another moment to scrutinize Pete's exterior. He then said, "And I've been hearing thingsâ€”"

Pete suddenly jerked his head in Justin's direction, a plea in his eyes, but no answer. He looked back to the surface of the table in front of him.

"I know that ten years here has made us pretty tough." Justin said. "...but if there was something on your mind, you could tell me."

Pete waited a whole minute to reply, merely an instant before Justin decided to leave the room. But he played it tough. "We have to get to Solomon's."

"What makes you say that?" Justin asked, confused.

"Maybe he could help us feel better, you know? He knows all about plants and shit. I think we might've went too far this time."

"Just what is it you think he can do for us?"

"I don't know," Pete said defensively, "come up with some shit to put in our lungs that'll neutralize the shit in our lungs."

Justin chuckled. "Nice try. Really, I am not trying to fuck with you, but all Solomon does is determine if shit is okay to smoke. I seriously doubt if he'd be able to help us."

"But he's a chemist! All the toys he's got in his place!"

"He may have some cool toys and know a few tricks, but let's just say he's not exactly M.I.T. material here."

"Well, then I'm going alone. Because I feel like shit and I want something to make this go away. Unless you know something I don't!"

"No, I don't. Can't you just deal with it like everyone else?"

"Hard toâ€”when it's always there." Pete sobbed into his sleeve.

Though no one could see the two of them, Justin didn't want Pete exiting the break room like this. It might invite trouble, like vultures encircling a dying beast. Justin looked around the room, then out the window.

"Alright, we'll go to Solomon's. We'll roll out to the igloo, get sleep, and then leave for Solomon's first thing."

"Good."

They stood together.

-

Afternoon had come. After what seemed like a double shift, the work day had ended. Not too long from now, night would be prepared to fall over the barren, yet hostile plains all over again. Justin acted.

"Everyone get your shit ready. We're going home."

No one answered, but everyone understood and moseyed over to the bay doors.

Once everyone was suited up and ready, Justin pointed the Mongoose on a vector straight out of the inner courtyard and into the dark, yawning tunnel. Procedurally, everything was fine. They were cleared by the guards and they left the cityscape.

Once back at the igloo after the ride across the plains, Justin immediately dismounted. Not wasting a single stride, he proceeded to the stolen pallet of water around back and snagged as much as he could from it. He paced his way back to the atrium where everyone had already taken up their places. They were ready for sleep before another long ride to Solomon's. Justin cracked open a bottle and shot it down the hatch. After a few swift gulps and a breath thereafter, someone broke the silence. It was Pete. And everyone was still standing and listening.

"I think we're doing the right thing by going to Solomon's."

"Whatever." Justin replied.

"It's not like THI has a good health plan."

"They don't have a health plan."

"I know."

"Whatever. Look, everyone, let's just go to bed. We'll do another outing to Solomon's in the morning."

Justin immediately claimed the couch thereafter, stretching his feet over the far armrest. Moments went by as everyone went to their places of rest, Justin's posture growing more and more slack as his body comformed to the couch's contours. The light was still on and it shone into his half-shut eyes. He knew that eventually someone would shut it off. That was the unspoken rule: last one in or out hits the light. He was almost asleep when Chris emerged from the heater room. The boy strolled in and sat down in the dirt, wiggling his bottom to make a soft depression. It was then that Justin noticed something odd.

Chris took out a book from his breast pocket, opening it to about the middle. The cover was opened to full spread as Chris clutched it in both hands, the entire breadth of it looking Justin dead in the face. The spine and both the front and back cover were wrapped in a swath of large-scaled leather painted in a deep, lustorous red that looked more like blood the way the light glared off of it. It was an oddity in itself that the leather had maintained its pigmentation after all

these years.

"I've never seen that book before." Justin said.

Chris marked the page with something unseen and looked up to meet Justin's gaze. "Found it in the bottom of the pile. Good book, you know."

Justin raised his chin at the boy. "What's it about."

"It's this fantasy novel about all these people from different lands, some very far away from one another. So these people, they all start having these dreams, okay? Like...visions."

Feigning interest, Justin started to fall back asleep. "Okay. Special dreams for special people."

"Except this is like a whole bunch of people having the _same _dream. They're all having this dream that they should go to this one place. They don't know why or anything, but they just have this feeling that they have to go there."

Justin's eyes opened again. He tilted his head up, looking straight at Chris. "Like they've been summoned."

"Yes, exactly." Chris replied.

"Do they know? Do they know they're all having the same dream?"

"No, that's what's so cool. They all think it's just them, that maybe they're like...going crazy or something so they don't want to admit it."

"They don't want to admit they're hearing things and seeing things." Justin said, sitting up now, his posture totally erect. "But they're not crazy, are they?"

"No, it's real. It's really happening."

"It _is _happening, isn't it?" Justin said. "Something larger than themselves. But they're just not ready to hear it."

"Yeah, but then later they do. So if you're gonna read this, I don't want to spoil it."

"You have to let me read that book."

Chris' mouth dropped open. "But...but I was reading it."

"I mean...you're only halfway through it so you won't be done any time soon. Let me start on it some time tomorrow."

Chris frowned. "Okay, I guess we can take turns or whatever."

"Thanks, kid."

"Yup."

Justin slowly wound down and eventually went to sleep.

-

Justin awoke in the middle of the night.

This didn't usually happen. He often slept quite well. There was usually nothing worth waking for.

But he heard some heavy rustling coming from another room. Any other night, and it would've simply been one of the others getting some water or relieving themselves. But Justin wasn't taking any chances ever since the group came down with this 'affliction'. He rose from the couch.

He turned on a fluorescent light overhead, its ghostly-white haze filling the cold room. He could see that everyone, minus Pete, was here and fast asleep. But the rustling and the piercing glow of the light now woke up Chris.

"What's going on?" Chris said groggily, pawing at his own eyes.

"Nothing. Just stay put."

"What's that noise?"

"_Stay put._" Justin ordered.

Chris complied with a frown and Justin set off further into the igloo. It got colder for every meter progressed, every footstep accomplished. And the only sound was that of the noises that woke him. _The heater is off_, Justin thought. _Why would Pete shut off the heat?_

Not that it mattered terribly much, for the heater was getting replaced soon for a better one. Still, why shut it off?

Justin reached the door to the heater room. The rustling was louder now as he drew nearer. He glanced at the door seam near the floor: there was no light on inside. What was Pete doing all alone, in the dark, causing this amount of racket?

Justin nudged two fingers on the door to slowly open it. He peered through the crack he made, but couldn't see anything. He looked back over his shoulder at Chrisâ€"still tucked away in his sleeping bag and eyeing Justin warily. "Turn the light off." Justin ordered.

Chris stood up, letting the fabric around him fall to the ground, and reached for the light switch. All fell to darkness. Justin peered back into the heater chamber and could just barely make out the outlines of Pete's silhouette. He was standing, his back leaned up against the vent column that stretched bi-directionallyâ€"it started from somewhere underground, spanned through the igloo and then finally up to the ceiling where the vent hood was.

"Is he having a smoke?" Chris whispered.

Justin waved him off and tried to let his eyes adjust to the dark.

A moment later and Justin could make out the whites of Pete's eyes. They were wracked with both pain and fear simultaneously. Justin acted.

He threw the door open and switched on the light. Pete was convulsing violently as he stood against the vent pipe. A few drops of blood had collected at his feet and stained the metal floor. Justin rushed over to him and placed his face directly in line with Pete's. "What's wrong?!" Justin shouted.

There was no answer from Pete, just pain and blood and tears. He wasn't even breathing.

"What the fuck is going on?" Justin shouted.

Then, everyone in the igloo was awake and came rushing over to the scene, crowding in the doorway.

Justin sidestepped around Pete to see what it was that was hurting him. "Step away from the pipe!" Justin said to Pete. But Pete didn't respond, just kept on shaking and bleeding.

Justin immediately wrapped his hands over Pete's shoulders and pulled on his torso to get him free. There was no hope of it, though. He was practically glued to it. "Give me a hand!" Justin shouted to the rest.

They all darted towards them and grabbed any part of Pete they could, yanking on him with all their might until he finally budged free. Pete's limp body fell face first to the floor, barely saved from concussion by two or three of the rescuers. The center of his back was a bloody mess. Justin barely missed it, but he saw what had grabbed a hold of Pete: some sort of arachnid with long, fleshy tentacles. It skittered back down into the pipe immediately. Justin walked over to it as the others stayed back and tended to Pete. Some of the grating had been twisted and mangled where the creature attacked from. "What the fuck?" Justin whispered.

"What?" Chris asked.

"There's no way something that small couldâ€"

"â€"Pete's not moving!" Ken shouted.

Justin pushed everyone aside and knelt down next to Pete. He watched for rises and falls in his chestâ€"nothing. He took Pete's pulse at the wristâ€"nothing. "You:" Justin said, pointing at Ken, "start CPR. I'm going to get some water."

"Okay!" Ken shouted adrenally. He immediately went to work on Pete, desperately trying to recall the techniques of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation that were seldom used in his mind.

Justin ran outside as fast as he could. He ripped away some of the plastic wrap draped over the pallet and retrieved as much water as his arms could carry, and ran back inside. Before he could even clear the atrium, everyone was running out, more panicked than they ever were. "What the fuck are you doing?"

No one stopped for Justin, they all just said, "RUN!!!"

15. In the Mouth of the Monster

In the Mouth of the Monster****

Right as Justin entered the igloo for Pete, he was met with a stampede of everyone else. They ignored him and bolted for the outside. Fear filled their eyes. "RUN!" they cried.

Justin was too stubborn to comply. He made for the atrium door as everyone scampered past him, and pushed it open just a little to see for himself what made them so afraid. He peeked his head inside and was met with the most troubling sight:

Dozens of the little creatures crawling his way. Fast.

"Shit!"

Not even the time to turn away and run, Justin forcefully threw his own body backwards to clear the atrium doorway.

In a fraction of a second, he could make out with stunning detail their sharp-tipped limbs swiping forward as they scrambled for the light of day.

Justin fell backwards as planned, lashing out to the door's outer padlock tabs on the way down. The weight of his own body slammed the door shut. Now resting on the clay outside, his arms became painfully stretched as he held, but Justin wasn't letting go for anything.

Hands as vice grips, he held the protrusions and used their strength to pull himself up while catching his breath. He started to hear them, scratching against the metal on the other side. There he remained, forever if necessary. He wasn't letting those things out into the open, remembering how strong and swift they were. One of them was enough to counter the strength of four men in the right situation, he remembered. And they were blindingly fast; Justin whipped his head and glanced about, making sure none escaped the all-metal confines of the igloo. Justin could hear their insect-like appendages pinging against the metal hull as they roamed about, perhaps in frustration. Maybe they were intelligent enough to know they were yet again trapped. And the racket was considerably loud despite their small size.

Justin regained his breath. "Fuck!" he screamed absentmindedly. "Gimme something to lock this door!" Justin ordered as the others stood watch.

Ken burst into action, running around the immediate area looking for a wedge or a bar or something to hold the door closed. It needed to have excellent tensile strength or else it was just a novelty—one which none of them could afford. From what Ken had witnessed in the igloo, there was no outrunning them. A solution had to be permanent. Finally, he found a shovel leaning up against the North face of the structure. It was old and rusty and the wooden portion of it looked rotted almost to the core, but it was the only option for them. "Here!" he said, handing it to Justin.

Justin grabbed a hold of the door with one hand and slid the shovel through the padlock slot with the other. The bulk of the tool barely fit inside. But to everyone's relief, the metal portion of it was a fit. The material was only a mild steel stamping, but it would work at least for the time being. They could at least escape to find a more feasible way of dealing with the loosed creatures.

Justin gave the outer hull a swift kick with his boot in frustration and the creatures inside were encrazed by the sound. The metal walls teemed with scratches and more pinging that didn't die.

"Is Pete dead?" Chris asked.

"Dead or dying." Ken said, running a hand through his blonde hair rather roughly.

"Only one way to find out." Justin said with a grimace.

"We can't go back in there!" Chris said. "I saw those things _literally_ lift Pete off the floor! They are too strong, and too many."

"Wait!" Ken said. "Where's the shotgun? Did anyone bring it outside with them?"

Everyone looked around and at one another.

No. No one brought it outside. They were too scared to even think. They simply fled at the sight of the things pouring into the heater room.

"I'll take that as a no." Justin inferred.

"What are we gonna do?" Ken asked, wide-eyed.

"Those things have unlimited access to our igloo now." Justin said. "We can't go back inside unless we have a plan to kill them. We have to get to someone we know has firearms, otherwise we're _never_ getting back inside and saving Pete."

"Um, I don't think anyone will lend us a weapon." Bill said matter 'o factly. Everyone cast their gaze to him. "I'm sorry to be the killjoy here, but have you ever issued anyone _your_ weapon?"

"You gotta point." Justin admitted. "But Pete might still be alive, so we need to do something. The only way we're running away is if we're going to get a weapon and get our home back!"

"But he's most likely dead." Ken replied, his body stiffening in regret an instant later. "I'm sorry," he sighed, "but our only hope now is getting back our only place to live."

"Either way, we _need_ a weapon, and quick." Justin asserted.

"What about the stockyards?" Chris asked. "Got any connections that can get you a quick deal?"

Justin snapped his finger and smiled at Chris. "You knowâ€¦I just might. C'mon. Everyone, get ready to roll out."

* * *

><p>Justin gunned the ATV at full throttle through the cold, dusty plains. He raced over smooth clay and talc-fine sugar sand and harsh moguls at top speed, Chris on the back hanging on with tensed hands. What was once a manageable glide through the lands was now altogether different at this irksome velocity. They were in a race against time. Who knew what those little creatures were doing to Pete by now? In all likelihood, he was probably dead.<p>

Normally, Justin would exude greater care in circumventing the small obstacles here and thereâ€"which became highly pronounced with greater and greater speed. And two skiers in tow were not only getting the full workout, they were also getting a face full of the Mongoose's filthy tread wake. They never skied at this speed before, never wanted to, but they managed to negotiate the harsh landscape with a little mind over matter. It was their luck that the Flower's effects hadn't occurred full force for the moment.

After a brutal session on the skiers' joints, they finally reached the outskirts of City 17â€"in record time. Not that anyone ever counted.

Justin blasted by the Admin district and plowed through the tunnel rapidly approaching, zooming into the yawning dark. Within a matter of seconds at that sustained velocity, the gate was at hand. After the necessary halt by the gate sentries, he was back at it again, speeding through the other half of the tunnel and skyrocketing up the final ramp into the inner sanctum with a few inches of air beneath. They landed at the foot of the courtyard with a firm bounce, Justin exuding no intent on slowing. The Mongoose's powerplant surged briefly and was churning back to top RPM in another instant after the suspension completely dampened out the oscillations.

The expansive vestibule was predictably empty of people and objects. Justin's eyes were glued to the Easterly front. He headed in that direction, spanning the entire courtyard in seconds and entering another downward grade in the pavement. They dove under the stout perimeter wall and the mighty spire disappeared from above. Justin kept on going until he had to slow for another entry control point deep inside the dark passage. The guards swiftly sent them through and the Mongoose and all its ferry emerged into the sought-after stock yard a moment later.

Light flooded once again. Rows upon columns of fenced-in squares were spread out before them, arranged in an orderly grid fashion beneath the clouds. The complex stretched at least one-hundred meters out. Housed inside each cage were shrink-wrapped pallets sitting over 2x4s of dunnage. Justin took his feet off the pegs and let them drag on the ground as he emerged from the entrance, the Mongoose now slowed to a crawl. He coasted down the main column, no turns or detours taken, his head pointed to the right as he scanned informative placards fastened to the chain-link in a line of storage units. Fold-out tables and plastic chairs and half-smoked butts littered the occasional aisle.

The various drop shipments of the day were landed with precision guidance some distance further out, where empty field met a final fortification. The unpackaged contents were moved a short distance to this staging area where they were placed on transportable pallets. It

was then that Chris took notice of a structure equally as massive as the Lookout some distance behind them. Up ahead was an orbital tether towering above them to heights unseen. He assumed it had always been obscured due to it being directly inline with the Eastern Spire, not to mention it lied inside the heaviest patch of smog present in any direction.

It moved slowly like canted clotheslines of rustic villages he'd seen in some outer colony. Clove-hitch apparatuses jutted out from the main 'girder' like footpegs. Further and further up, Chris craned his neck skyward and caught sight of a few cargo containers anchored to these hitches, hauling toward the space elevator's highest point.

"You ever thought about escaping?" Chris asked of Justin. "Box yourselves inside one of those airtight containers and stowaway?"

Justin was searching for a specific location designated for firearms and/or ammunition, meandering through the maze with the ATV now at a crawling speed. He halted with a squeeze of the front brake lever and the slotted rotors gave a slight groan under the strong clamping force of hydraulically-assisted calipers.

"Are you dumb? You didn't think for one second that they'd already thought of that?"

"Well, has anyone ever tried it?"

"The first and only guy to do it was sent back down a week later."

"Well, at least he tried."

"...In several sections."

"Uh, what?"

"NMA hacked him up and sent his corpse down in a series of five or six containers. Get the message?"

Justin craned his neck and saw the cage was uncharacteristically low on supplies with only a single pallet standing a measly half-meter off the dunnage. He dismounted and stepped up to the locked, chain-link door and peered closer at the weatherproof display's readout:

C-17

>LOT# 001
CAGE# 055

>CARGO: SMALL ARMS & ANCILLARY HARDWARE
**CONTENTS:
(5) Bandolier, sets; (5) Belts, utility; (5) Combat Boots, pair; (3) Optical Sights, LASER; (30) Field Cleaning Kit, firearms; (20) Hex Key, drivers

Justin sighed and looked away. He glanced toward the field beyond.

Some of the workers Justin knew well were just getting off shift, walking his way from the drop zone. Even from this distance, he could tell they'd worked particularly hard this day, their boots and

trousers heavily soiled, their hands limp and weary beneath their oil and clay-stained gloves. A few robotic loaders and a stolen Cyclops unit were all parked under a nearby awning, their fuel cells charging until the next drop. Unfortunate that they hadn't worked as hard to deliver any firearms today. But of course it wasn't _their _fault. They had no control over what arrived. Whatever dropped...dropped. Whenever it got here...it got here.

Justin remounted the Mongoose and sped a short distance to the incoming flock, full throttle. Upon them, he nailed both sets of brakes and shut down the engine with a swift jab of the killswitch. Bill and Ken, on their skis, flew by and came to a stop five meters ahead of him from the abrupt change of inertia. Both skiers flared out and expertly stopped, but glanced back at Justin with disapproving glares. Justin paid no mind and held up a hand at his most trusted contact. It was Zebulan, a rather obese, slow-moving man who always worked as much as he could and much harder than anyone else, to which Justin never knew why or cared.

"Zeb."

The exhausted yard worker was practically huffing as he strolled over, less than enthusiastic to head in any direction other than home. "What's up, Reid?"

"Need a favor. Weapons crate has everything I don't need. If you come through on this one, I'll owe _you_."

"Spit it out."

"Need a gun. Preferably, a shotgun. If you can throw in a frag grenade, I'll pay you back with a double helping of smokes or liquor or whatever the next shift I got."

"You came at a bad time. I can't do guns right now. Not only did we just pack up for the day, but the manifests have had no guns for at least a week."

"Nothing in back-stock? The mezzanines?"

"Nope. I think we're set to receive some in a couple of days, though. Can it wait 'till then?"

Justin bit his lower lip. "No." he said absentmindedly. "No, it can't wait. But just set it aside for me anyway." Justin pedaled the Mongoose about to 180°, fired it up and sped back to the inner courtyard. "Thanks!" he said over his shoulder.

After a somber coast, he gradually came to a stop right in the middle of the giant, diamond-shaped vestibule outside the factory where they usually labored day after day. Justin stared up into the steel-grey sky for a moment. "Soâ€|anyone got any ideas?" he asked. "I'm only gonna ask once."

"I wish I knew what to do." Ken said, looking into the sky. "â€|Maybe we can just use the shovel on them? Splatter them into blood and guts?"

"How fast those things move...maybe." Justin said. "What about you, Bill?"

Bill simply shook his head. He was never really good at violence even if it was enacted upon a completely malevolent enemy. Even a non-human, malevolent enemy.

"Okay, then." Justin said. He fired up the Mongoose yet again and sped out away from the factory district.

Through the tunnel, into the Admin district and back onto the crumbling road, Justin halted one last time. There had to be some solution, something they overlooked, something obvious. He looked up and found himself facing the mine shaft where he first stumbled upon the Trumpet Flower. Strangely enough, the entrance was blocked off with bouldersâ€”orâ€”rather it had collapsed by the look of it. Justin paid no mind to it nonetheless, for that mine was better off forgotten. He'd never venture there again. Smoking that plant had been among the worst of choices he'd ever made.

Just as he panned his sights away from that cursed cave, he realized where he had parked the Mongoose, where everyone currently stood.

The fork in the road.

He looked toward the horizon far beyond. Hazy, grim and bleak was the sight that way. He stared into it thoughtfully.

"What are you thinking?" Bill asked.

"We're going that way. We're going to get a gun."

Bill was a holy man, had been most of his life. His vocabulary was not known for being very colorful. He rarely uttered expletives; such words served little purpose other than to draw negative attention to one's self. But what Justin suggested, rather, ordered, warranted one little exception.

"Ohâ€¦shit."

* * *

><p>No one said a word during the trip down the road never to be traveled.<p>

Everyone knew perfectly well it was uncharted territory, yet none could fathom what the journey had planned for them. The flat, endless terrain eventually betrayed them. Barely visible now were the faint and blocky shapes of boulders scattered throughout the landscape ahead. Within a few moments at 45kph, they were navigating amid them. Many places to hide for potential adversaries. And anyone could hear them coming a kilometer away.

But over some time at a low-speed cruise, the lifeless world had a calming effect on their nerves. The wind pelted gently at their faces. The whine of the engine was lulling. But before any rider had the time to stray into dream, any harmony to be had in such a world was instantly stolen at the sight of a mass grave.

What once looked to be smaller boulders a moment ago weren't. Muddled, half-frozen corpses laid motionless, some stacked two or

three high, almost perfectly preserved by a paper-thin frost layer. Even the faces were still in life-like condition after ten years. A sea of eyes remained wide open, and for more than a gravball field the fallen of The Unknown War bared truth of the planet's past unto passerbys. All but Chris had seen this sight before. Little had changed. The boy tried to look away but he couldn't. If the faces weren't so easily visible, he might've had another chance to preserve what innocence was left in him. But it was mostly the eyesâ€”thousands of them.

"More history." Justin said as they rode past the scene.

Of course, every area contiguous to other cities was much the same. The coordinated, anarchistic efforts of Kaiser Sergei many years ago were far-reaching. Even if the mysterious warlord had any decency placed into his campaign against the oppressive rule of THI, he couldn't conceivably control his entire army, either. Hundreds of thousands died under his command, innocents included. Presently, no one knew exactly how influential the man was these days, which presented ever more danger.

Now, everyone had peeled eyes and perked ears, a heightened sense of perception. At one point or another in the journey, each of them thought the exact same thing: that the sound of the Mongoose riding through the plains seemed to paint a bull's-eye on them all. A factory in the distance had doubled in size since the departure from City 17, but there was no comfort to be had despite the returning signs of looming civilization. Not only was the mass grave a stark reminder of the bitter reality, but the new city was not their destinationâ€”the shanty town before it was. And it was suffocating with a rivaling amount of dust and manmade fallout in its own right. Visible from a great distance was the cloud reigning over it.

The human-boulders disappeared as they transitioned into the outskirts of this establishment. Now, there were small huts and pre-fabbed metal structures and adobe brick houses, perhaps erected with the aid of Traxus IX's own crust. At the town's edge, a horde of prostitutes in plaid skirts and fishnet stockings loitered about, most of them men. Chris glanced confusingly on at them until he saw a far more wretched sight: children, most of them no more than ten years of age toting guns and co-mingling with the scantily-clad elderlies, smiling ear to ear and playing in the dirt with one another. Chris winced at the sight of them as they sped past.

"Traxus Nine native-borns." Justin said. "First offspring of this place. The only existence they've ever known and they're all happy as clams. Ignorance is bliss, eh?"

Chris was fixated on the wretched sight over his shoulder, growing ever smaller as they rode by. "It's terrible."

Bill conveyed the gesture of the Trinity to the heavens aboveâ€”Father, Son and Holy Spirit across his forehead and chestâ€”as if the lifeless skies would grant him safety and comfort as they ventured further in.

They had officially entered Kaiser Sergei's realm.

* * *

><p>The air was almost stifling as they progressed deeper into this exceptionally hideous domain, strange how the wavering heat around them prevailed over Traxus IX's super cooled atmosphere. Heavy industry was alive everywhere they turned. People labored in their various functions, be it in metal forges, tar and phosphate pits, or anything else that fueled heavy industry here. There was not a motionless person in sight. Many of them paused and did double takes at the Mongoose, now at a steady coast.<p>

To Chris, it was uncanny how Justin could keep a straight face.

Perhaps equally remarkable was how Justin could pick apart the detailed layout of a town as they sped through each one, getting closer and closer to their final destination. Nothing had changed over the years ever since their Kaiser held the majority share over the criminal underworld, organizing, refining it. He created a free market in the purest sense by attempting takeover after takeover, streamlining the lessors' efforts. Here, just outside of City 17 lied Kaiser Sergei's heartland.

Just like the homogeny THI had erected over the years, so too had he. Every community, if one could call them such, was more or less made up of concentric rings, only visible by way of function and the type of characters that traversed each one. At the innermost circle of every town was the presiding warlord, the commanding presence of all that took place in their domain. The immediate outlying circle was the weapons cache, always within close proximity to the warlord and his bodyguards, and most certainly under their direct control...always within reach. The next circle surrounding all that was the drug and human trafficking ring, undoubtedly the largest of them all. Past that were the drones, the workers.

For as far as one could peer into one of the many villages, the view only worsened the deeper it went. Again and again, town after town. A recursion of felonious fractal-patterns. Nature's work.

"See how he arranges his societal hierarchies?" Justin asked Chris as he glanced over his shoulder at the boy.

"Who, Sergei?"

"Yeah. Look."

"Where would he be?" Chris asked, maintaining his eye contact on the world around him.

"At dead center. And you can be sure he knows we're coming."

"You're scaring me now. And how do you know that he knows?"

"Word travels fast in a small town, boy. Didn't anyone ever teach you that? Look again...all the people that have already seen us coming. We haven't yet slowed down so they know we're not here for kicks."

Chris' grasp over the back of the driver's seat began to weaken and tremble.

"Hang in there. This isn't as bad as it looks."

Chris relaxed his stance and sighed powerfully, maintaining rigid eye contact with all the sights now surrounding them as they rocketed toward the epicenter of all this raw debauchery.

"...Because it's about to get much worse."

"Thanks, Justin."

The boy looked back at Bill and Ken on the skis: they were holding up just fine themselves. There was no fear in their eyes or faces, but then Chris instantly remembered what had transpired after they ingested that powerful flower. Any or all of them could have been hallucinating for the entire journey, but they still had coordination and were upright.

Justin gently swerved the Mongoose out the path of feral looking individuals obviously out looking for fights. Nothing seemed to faze him thus far in, a comfort to Chris. The worst seemed behind them now. The town had grown comfortably more silent and the air felt cooler as they left the bustling districts, with fewer and fewer denizens of this abominable nest meandering in and out of their way. But it was for a particular reason. They didn't belong here.

Up ahead of them lied a pre-fabbed building, just a large sheetmetal roof draped and riveted over its hidden support trusses. Subtle and not-so-subtle alterations distinguished it from the other structures of its kind further aft of them. The doors were wider, taller and looked sturdier at a passing glance. A double wall of sandbags was packed around the façade with defensive fighting positions dug in behind them, heavy machine gun turrets bristling outwards. Though currently unmanned, it was the only such place in this town with such fortification and firepower. This structure was prepared for a defensive battle, just the place a warlord would hunker down inside of.

"He'd be here, Chris." Justin smartly slowed. He chose a place to park a good walking distance away from the hideout and dismounted. Everyone else mirrored the move, slowly. Bill and Ken removed their skis and their overboots and slung them over their shoulders. They dared not leave it near the 'Goose, lest they wanted them to grow pairs of legs and walk away. Together, they approached the building, calmly, coolly. Two sentries held the front door on either side, milling about with mil-spec assault rifles carried loosely in their grasp. They suddenly focused on the group as soon as they were a stone's throw away.

The hideout had no windows, no doors along the sides. Maybe the rear was just the same. Before losing the angle of their sidelong approach, Justin could make out a small motor pool out back. Warthogs, Mongooses, and what looked to be the spare parts of an AV-14 attack Hornet were strewn out all over a wide patch of concrete. That portion of the view soon disappeared as they met the guards.

Justin held up a hand in greeting. The guards offered no reply, their current demeanor appearing severe as their overall character.

"Is the boss here?"

"Maybe. Who's asking?" One of them said. He was big and tall and wore Kevlar over his torso that protruded a slight amount over a fatty gut.

"My name is Reid and I want to talk business."

"Sergei don't need business from no travelers. Turn around and piss off."

The man hardened his stance, suggesting that unwanted visitors did well to walk away when told to.

"Before I go," Justin said, "do you value your job?"

The guards looked at one another. One of them shrugged and the larger one in front of Justin said, "I'm a fair man this fine day, so you have ten seconds to leave before I drop you." A succinct, metallic click announced to everyone that the weapon was just un-safed.

"Oneâ€|"

"Clearly you don't fully appreciate the opportunity the boss man has given you, entrusting his security to you."

"â€|Two."

"But don't get me wrong, you're doing a spectacular job at it. I just offered to trade with the most powerful man in all the plains and you clearly see that I'm of no use here just because I don't look like much."

"â€|Three."

"Is it just perception? Do I really appear so insignificant? Because I'm pretty sure myself that you know nothing of a real opportunity. I mean, if you asked me, I wouldn't have woke up one day and said to myself, man, I really want to be a security guard for the rest of my life."

"â€|Four!"

"You probably couldn't spot a deal if it ran up and smacked you in the asscheeks. Am I somewhat correct in saying this?"

"â€|_Five_." The guard bared gritted teeth.

Chris started to back away and head in the direction of the Mongoose.

"â€|Six."

"Uhâ€|Justin." Bill said. "Why don't we just come back another time? It seems as though they don't want to be disturbed today."

"â€|Seven."

Justin remained firmly in place. "Ken, get back to the 'Goose."

"Okay." Ken said, backpedaling slowly.

"â€|Eight."

"But I have an offer Sergei cannot refuse. Don't you at least want to hear me out?"

"â€|Nine."

"You're gonna be sorry if you don't hear me out." Justin said, grinning.

The other guard watching all this was baffled at Justin's defiance, wondering if Reid would suddenly run away in the next second or try to make a move on them or do something else foolish. He racked a round into the chamber of his rifle nonetheless and prepared to hose Justin down with bullets on his leader's action.

"Well, since I've only got a second left, I'll just take the liberty of divulging what it is I have to offer."

"â€|Ten."

"I can give him City Seventeen."

There was a brief moment of hesitation, the sentries' muzzles pointed squarely at Justin's chest.

They looked at one another and the subordinate lowered his weapon. The higher ranking individual then pushed open the door to a dimly lit interior, fuming with a powerful mix of adrenaline, anger, and whatever synthetics were coursing through his veins.

Justin smiled for a moment at the two of them.

"Well, what do you know? Logic prevails today. Good job, soldier. Good job."

He glanced back and waved everyone along.

16. A Congregation of the Wicked

****_A Congregation of the Wicked_****

Justin was the first to enter. Everyone followed behind him in single file.

Just as the view from the outside was, so was the insideâ€"very dim. Pole lamps hanging down were of some ancient novelty, burning incandescent bulbs overhead and setting the main aisle and the deep, shadowy alcoves in yellow-orange fuzz. The Kaiser either had a taste for the old things, or this was all he could get his hands on. Various thugs, assassins and lesser drug lords were gathered around the establishment, some at tables gambling or drinking their wits away at the nearby bar, or both. At the farthest corner, the only things visible were orange embers briefly flaring red in an opium den, a fragrant smoke lingering all throughout the ambiance. Other younger and impressionable kids no older than Chris simply milled about waiting to jump at the prospect of fulfilling some kind of

solemn oath they took in their recent pasts.

Justin knew why they were here: their proclaimed Kaiser had promised them a better life in return for services rendered. They could increase their own standing in the world, maybe chance getting back a shot at THI somehow.

All eyes were on them as they walked further in, the expressions on the many occupants' faces indiscernible. But Justin wouldn't let looks alone bar him from his mission to acquire a firearm. Of the many hard faces in the room, Justin instantly spotted quite a few 'well-knowns', even those tucked back in the dark recesses. The mug-shots digitally-encoded to those criminal records were still fresh in memory and coming back to life like it was ten years ago; those of Sergei's self-proclaimed High Bolshevik Party: Gregor Antonov, the political architect of Sergei's micro-revolution and right-hand man; and Konstantin Yurenev, leader of their armed forces, the elite of which were right here among the room, Sergei's dreaded Red Guard. So many watchful eyes were glued to them amid the near-silent periphery, the lion's den.

They traversed down the main aisle, many tables and chairs and villainous types seated in them just mere inches off to either side. It was common knowledge that people of these types wouldn't just let anyone in on a whim. Justin didn't dare jinx himself by the fact that he was miraculously granted passage. Even Chris knew entering meant you had something to offer—a strong and able body, knowledge in electronics or explosives or safe-cracking. Something of worth as long as it fit within the faction's designs. A cardinal, yet unspoken rule among the sub-villains was to make sure your presence never outlived your usefulness, which made Chris start to wonder—|

What is it we have to offer?

Then, he remembered what Justin said to the guards outside: that he could give them their city.

What could he possibly mean by that? _How does someone like Justin give away the city they work for?_

And then his doubts began to stir. Terror ran through Chris. He tried to hide it from leaving his eyes and reaching the many faces all around, forcing a tunnel-vision down the narrow aisle they walked. As they progressed even deeper, Chris whispered, "Ken, what exactly is Justin giving in exchange for a gun?"

Looking around the joint slowly so as to not exude fear, "I honestly don't know." Ken said. "He better have something up his sleeve, or—"

"—Or what?" Chris' eyes were stricken with panic.

"—Never mind. Don't worry about that. Just play along and back him up in whatever he says."

Chris inhaled a deep, calming breath. "Okay."

"Don't let them scare you. It's not you the attention's on."

"Right." Chris said.

They followed Justin's trail into another pair of armed guards, this time at the end of the corridor. They were halted at this final checkpoint.

"Came to see the Kaiser." Justin said in his stationary position.

One guard pointed a weapon at Justin's center mass while another frisked him.

"No need for that." a voice said from beyond. "Let him pass. I want to make introductions."

The personal sentries of the Kaiser stepped aside with faces of stone and made a hole for Justin, and Justin alone. Bill, Ken and Chris tried to follow but they were halted. It was of no use to protest, either. They were in uncharted, sovereign territory now. They were totally at their mercy, outnumbered and most certainly outgunned.

Justin paced a few more steps deeper in and found himself at the foot of a proverbial throne of sorts. Raised a meter off the ground and stretching from wall to wall was a massive shelf made of solid, blonde wood. Past translucent draperies, Justin could make out the silhouettes of people further beyond, though the light was too dim to clearly see who they were or what they were doing.

A lone male figure rose up and made his way towards the edge and parted the curtains away, stepping out onto the wood loft beneath him with bare feet.

There he was himself, Segei in the flesh, dressed in worn-out and loose-fitting jeans and an unbuttoned Parka. He had a long, flowing dark head of hair, swept back and splayed out like a damaged mane. The eyes were equally dark, seeming to absorb the ambient light of the room. Justin squinted as he looked onward at who was undoubtedly him. But Justin knew what he was up against. He knew Sergei had the brains to match the brawn and the cunning. This meant Sergei was not above negotiation. He would hear Justin out as long as Justin had something formidable to offer in return. Justin looked onward at him with no expression.

He then hopped down to the floor and approached Justin, stopping nearly at arm's length away. The two appeared to all as nearly equal in physicality. The same height and same build.

"Please, accept my apologies for the redundant security measures. You can never be too careful about protection around here." He extended an outstretched palm as well as a genuine smile across his face as if obliged to welcome travel-weary guests. "Well, I take it you know who I am. Who are you?"

Justin took the Kaiser's hand and shook powerfully once. "Name's Reid."

"Reid?" he said to himself, thinking. "Not the Reid that nearly dispatched two of my men recently?"

"Possibly. Who are your men?"

"Paulie, Jaggo!" Sergei ordered with a shout over his shoulder.

Within seconds, the pair rushed forth and approached his side with submissive gazes directed at Sergei's black eyes. One was an aging man, an eye concealed behind a patch. The other was much younger than Jaggo, tall and extremely built with muscle. He dwarfed everyone in the room.

It was the same two men that Justin had fought to protect Chris from nights ago.

"Recognize this man?!" Sergei barked.

The larger one nodded with shame in his eyes. "Aye, boss. We met him once."

"Sit back down." They complied hurriedly as he leveled his gaze back to Justin. "Quality help is hard to come by."

"Looks like you've widened your recruitment standards a bit over the years." Reid said.

Sergei smiled, though nothing suggested he felt the sting of Justin's jab. "Well, it doesn't matter who you are on Traxus Nine. Everyone needs to survive somehow, especially those who wish _not _to live a life of servitude in those factories."

Justin gave a pre-meditated nod in reply, but deep down he knew that unfortunately for those youths in this place it was the only perceivable choice for them, the best they had going. Criminally-skilled merchants of terror and destruction now united under the banner of the most skilled and destructive man of criminal legends.

"And I'm sure they weighed their options carefully."

"You must be one hell of a fighter, Reid. I could use a man like you in my army." Sergei looked to the periphery and said, "Bring out the varmint."

No sooner had Sergei looked back to Justin, two men began to drag someone into the room from another. The one in their grasp had already sustained a serious amount of injuries and did not appear to struggle against his captors. Chris winced, and Bill averted his sights to somewhere else in the room. They placed him off to the side of Sergei and Justin, and he simply knelt on the floor, unable to hold a steady gaze at anyone. Blood dripped from his nose and mouth, and pooled on the floor. Only a moan was heard.

Sergei looked at Justin while pointing to the ground. "Coincidentally, we have a new opening, Reid."

Sergei withdrew a pistol and shot the man in the head.

The blast rang out in the small room as the victim crashed to the floor, motionless.

Justin wasn't fazed and held his sight at Sergei, though the others were frozen in shock. Bill had his eyes closed and mumbled prayers. Chris' eyes went wide. Ken was petrified where he stood, unable to run away as he'd wished.

"This one was treacherous, though I do admire his will power. Never talked, not once. Never gave away the identities of those he colluded with."

"I'm willing to consider joining you," Justin began, "but I came to talk business for now."

Sergei took a step back and leaned up against the face of the loft. Before looking Justin in the eyes again, he reached into the tattered pocket of his jeans and retrieved a brightly-colored, Braeburn apple imported from New Zealand—almost half the galaxy's distance away. Despite the undoubtedly long journey to his hands, its surface looked remarkably fresh as if it were just handpicked by him from some nearby orchard. Despite the man's infamy, he certainly had connections somewhere on and off-world.

He wiped it on his sleeve with long, slow strokes. He smiled inwardly, the sound of his voice signaling intrigue. "What sort of business?"

Justin was blunt.

"I need weapons for a little problem I've got."

"What sort of weapons do you need to eradicate this problem?"

"A light order. A shotgun and a frag grenade."

Sergei lightly scratched at one of his sharp cheekbones. "A shotgun is light, Reid, but a frag grenade?"

"It's just a contingency. You'll probably get it back."

"And what if I don't get it back?"

"Then it means I'm probably dead, which'll make little difference to you either way."

"Well, yes, it will make somewhat of a difference because I'll have loaned out two weapons with nothing to show for it. I need some kind of return. What is this little problem of yours anyway?"

"Pests."

"Pests?"

"Pests."

â€|Kaiser Sergei burst into laughter, and soon all the criminals joined. The entire room was alive with it. Ken and Bill and Chris glanced around nervously.

Sergei's face was pointed straight up as the joyous notes belted from within, reverberating a slight amount against the sheet metal

ceiling. His laugh was so uncontrollable that those jet-black eyes had almost disappeared behind their lids. Amidst the uproar, someone emerged from a shadowy alcove and crept up to Chris immediately started petting his hair. They got one full stroke before Chris pivoted and threw the hardest punch he could muster into the subject's ribs, but it only staggered them slightly. Ken stepped forth and shielded the boy and almost regretted he did when a half-dozen other degenerates rose from their seats, their chair legs abruptly sliding back with a cacophony of ear-lancing groans. The room soon quieted down as their leader stopped laughing and settled into light, sporadic chuckles, which in turn drove Chris and Ken's antagonizers back to their chairs.

"I've got the occasional pest problem too!" Sergei said, pointing to the dead man at their feet. He then sighed merrily and took a full bite out of his apple. "You got spiders or something?"

"Actually, yes." Justin replied.

Sergei was momentarily brow-beaten by this response, his head cocked to one side studying Justin. The next instant, he replied, "Well, they must be poisonous and very aggressive!"

Everyone laughed yet again and Justin patiently, impassively waited for the idiocy to settle.

"I thought you were serious there for a second, Reid." Sergei smiled once at Justin before staring off into space. He prodded his tongue about his lower teeth to remove a morsel of apple skin trapped there, then nodded to men unseen in the distance of the gloomy establishment. All humor in his voice was gone and his face was level again. "Go ahead and take care of your little ordeal. Afterwards, you will enlist in my army and fight when I call upon you. And you will use the weapons I give to you now."

"No."

Sergei pulled the savory apple away from his mouth before he bit down. His brow then raised. "...No?"

"That's not the deal I had in mind."

"Mister Reid, it's not wise to say no to a man of my stature."

"I can do better than fire a gun for you. I'll smuggle you the best items you can get your hands on. City Seventeen is only miles away. You can fight your wars with a supply line that I provide."

"I could have my soldiers infiltrate the city and do that anyway. My common practice is to eliminate the middleman if you get my meaning. You don't want to join my army, so why would I need you? Much less, help you with your _pest_ problem."

"Because I have _access_ to the good stuff. I'm a time-trusted employee, ten years running. You send in your minions to the cities, they get a morsel here and there and not much else. Everyone in there knows who your guys are and who they're really working for...it's obvious. How do you plan to get your boys in there and get enough gear to make a dent in your enemies? All it takes is one self-righteous line-worker to tip off the Admin, then security goes

on overdrive."

"We'll be covert." Sergei smiled.

"Gonna send in a dozen men to steal without getting noticed? They might not get busted the first time, but you won't acquire enough the first time either. You'll need to send them in again, and again. How do they plan to make ties with the workers at Shipping & Receiving? It would take you months, years even. You don't have the kind of pull that I do. I don't have to cause any racket just to get things. And if you decide to storm the city, THI will starve us all out...you know that. Why risk it? You'll just be making more enemies that way, so let me do your dirty work for you. I can keep you up and running without tipping anybody off to what's really going on, and when you're finally ready to coordinate your final retribution you can do it with confidence. Everybody wins except your enemies."

"Hmm." Sergei raised his head a little higher, mulling over Justin's proposition with a free hand on his chin, his gang ready to pounce at the snap of his finger should he decide against it. "What sort of supplies do you offer?"

"Well, you are building up your army again."

"You could say that."

"When you take back what is yours, you'll need food to do it. You'll need munitions, parts for vehicles, fuel, and water."

"Of course."

"Then City Seventeen has everything you need. I'll put in the orders to ramp up the drop-shipments. I'll do it slowly in intervals at first so there's no suspicion."

The Kaiser thought about the proposal. The air grew still and quiet with a myriad of guns locked and cocked and ready to be drawn in Justin's direction, every occupant in the room just waiting for the fateful decision.

"â€|Done." Sergei announced, raising his hands briefly. "I shouldn't have to remind you that the consequences of not fulfilling your end of the bargain would be dreadful."

"I know what everyone in here is capable of."

"I know." Sergei smiled, admirably. "I had that feeling about you. You do your homework. I like that. Shows initiative for what needs doing." Sergei stood straighter, his back now off the support of the sturdy wood. "Excellent, it's settled." he spoke louder. "My men will furnish you one shotgun and one grenadeâ€|on your way out of course. Two nights from now, we will call upon you to give us aid."

"Works for me."

"Are you sure you don't want to elevate yourself from consultant status and join us? We'll be taking this whole world _and _the THI by storm and I could really use you."

"Fighters rise and fall all the time. Why so interested in just

one?"

"A man that can fight battles _and _who knows logistics? You already know that answer. How about it, Reid? You'd get a high position, very high indeed."

"I'll think about it."

Kaiser Sergei reached out his hand again, palm facing up. "My men will see you to the door."

Justin ignored the esteemed gesture and spun around, instantly strolling to the exit at his own pace. Bill, Ken and Chris hurriedly preceded him as he marched their way. The guards parted the doors in front and the group was soon met with the light of the muted day.

The ambiance of Traxus IX was never a welcome sight, but now it was practically a little slice of heaven compared to the stark scene and tension of Sergei's lair.

They all walked over to the Mongoose while Justin stayed behind to receive his weapons. With one guard's rifle trained on him, Justin was handed what he needed. Satisfied, he departed the doorstep with a care-free stride. He racked the barrel of the shotgun and held it there as he marched, inspected down the length of it. The action was smooth, almost frictionless in his grip. The black powder coated steel of the weapon was stout and the dense but stock felt reassuring in his hands. The fragmentation grenade he stowed in his pocket was a UNSC standard-issue M9 HE-DP. He'd used many of them before. In his mind, the retaking of the igloo would be a walk in the park. He took the driver's seat of the Mongoose.

The others hurried their pace the closer they got to the Mongoose.

"I've never seen anyone die like that before." Chris said as Justin approached. "Are you really gonna do what you said back there?"

"What?"

"You're not going to supply them, are you?"

"Shut the fuck up, kid, and let me think." Justin fired up the Mongoose and pointed the cowl of it due home. "Let's just concentrate on getting the igloo back."

17. House Cleaning

**House Cleaning**

As quickly as Justin drove the Mongoose into the Kaiser's putrid and treacherous realm only moments ago, he was now on the move again, leaving with Chris and Ken and Bill in tow. The engine whined at top RPM as the shanty town faded away behind them, the smog and the dust and the crimson fire diminishing into the bottom of the horizon. Chris placed his sights back to the front, anticipating a different view. But now, they were headed back to the igloo. God only knew what

was waiting in store. Was Pete dead? Was he dying? Would he ever forgive them all for leaving and not fighting to save his life?

"I really admire the way you handled that back there." Chris said.

"Thanks."

"I would've folded for sure."

"Eh, don't sell yourself short, Kid. You would've done the same thing if you were in my shoes."

"I'm not so sure."

Holding a conversation with the engine noise and the wind rushing past wasn't easy, but Justin's voice easily permeated it all. "Once you understand your adversary, you can adapt to them. Then, only then, can you defeat them—or reason with them."

"So you understand him then?"

"I've met a few types in my years. Sergei is unique. He's a visionary."

"What do you mean, visionary?"

"He leads and people follow. He's obviously very strong-willed. You've seen him up close so you know he looks the part, charismatic, can easily sway a person's decisions. How else could someone lead the people in that room?"

"You'd have to be special."

"He gives wayward men direction and a purpose. Most of them buy into it, at least for a long time. To them..." Justin glanced about the wide plains as the Mongoose drove on "...he's king of the world."

"How is it you understand him?"

"I studied him for many months. I see Sergei as any other criminal, corrupt and getting desperate or foolish people to carry out his dirty work."

"That's it?"

"Plain and simple."

"What's with his eyes? They're so black."

"Surgical discoloration. Probably did it so he could fake a retinal scan."

Chris stopped leaning forward and took in the barren view.

"Now that you've made introductions, it changes the way you think about the universe, eh?"

Chris didn't answer.

Ever since his arrival at Traxus IX, he was sickened day by day, discovering awful truths inherent in the human race, and how he seemed to uncover more of it as time progressed on this cold, dead worldâ€”as if the moral integrity of mankind could be peeled away over and over again like the layers of an onion until finally reaching a bottomless core of pain and villainy...which was apparently Sergei.

Here Chris was on this heartless worldâ€”a black hole in the galaxy, far away from a real existenceâ€”and yet he experienced more reality inside it than out. He knew more about the corruption and the greed and the darkness of the universe without even living in it, on the outside looking in. Somewhere out there in the Milky Way, in many places far away, there was a galactic war occurring between Human and Covenant forces. Which was worse?

The remainder of the ride home went on in silence, much in the way it always did.

They reached the fork in the road, all occupants turning to regard City 17 as they whipped by at max speed. The Admin courtyard was predictably empty and the mine shaft from where Justin and Chris retrieved the flower was closed off, whether by natural occurrence or someone's doing. The usual sights breezing past them were all just visual triggers to memories of everyday life; none of it seemed to matter. Not that it ever did, but so much had transpired in just a few hours:

Four out of five of them had taken the wildest trip of their lives off the Trumpet Flower, some of them quite possibly still intoxicated by it. Chris was beginning to wonder if any of their sanity had been peeling away just like the dwindling hope he witnessed in mankind. Adding to this now were the strange voices in their heads further deteriorating their minds. Chris kept adding up the growing list of catastrophes they had experienced in this short amount of time...

Strong, fast and aggressive creatures invaded their igloo and attacked Pete, and his condition was yet to be ascertained. They had just ventured into the domain of arguably the most dangerous man in-system to acquire the weapons to deal with their deadly predicament. Consequently, yet another serious issue arose from their business deal: Justin had pledged service in Kaiser Sergei's army. _What the fuck is happening to this place? _Chris mumbled into the deafening wind. There was no answer to his question, and he expected none, at least nothing logical he could ponder, so he reflected on something Solomon saidâ€”|

Something is happening to this world

And now they were about to storm back into the igloo, literally with guns blazing. Actually, there'd only be one gunâ€”wielded by Justin. Everyone else would have to go strictly on faith as Justin took care of business alone; that much, Chris envisioned.

Not much further now.

City 17 had even faded from sight and their destination was now at hand. A Graveball field away, and Justin slowed to a coast. And for

good reason. He propped himself up with his weight on the handle bars, jockeying for a good bead on the igloo sitting quaintly in its own little niche. From his vantage point, he could see that the shovelâ€”the rudimentary deadbolt they used to secure the only doorâ€”was still in place and holding. Justin breathed easy as he darted the ATV forth again, dead ahead to the igloo. It was time.

He stopped the Mongoose right where it usually sat each night and killed it. He was the first to dismount. Everyone was slow to make whatever preparations they needed to make, most of them looking dubiously to the ground, avoiding Justin's eye contact for the moment. He patiently waited. He knew this would be hard on them, to speculate, and thus possibly confirm that Pete was indeed dead. The little bastards inside their house were something truly from Hell. But Justin had the antidote, the black but stock of it tucked into the pit of his right arm.

"Time for a little house cleaning." Justin said, a steely gaze cast towards his new weapon as he fed cartridges into its receiver.

Bill immediately walked away towards the water pallet, maybe for safety reasons or maybe to preserve whatever innocence he had left. Or maybe some other reason entirely. Whatever the case, Justin could put himself in Bill's shoes and understand him, if only for a moment. This was Pete. It was hard.

Ken nodded stoically. And Justin took note of his disposition. Ken might prove to be a fighter, and Justin could really use that trait if things got nasty in there. But he wasn't about to levy expectations on anyone; he was actually on the verge of second-guessing this whole operation himself.

Finally, Justin looked down upon Chris. He didn't exude much of a reaction at all, but Justin knew he was ready for whatever was about to happen.

"Whatever happens," Justin said, pausing his advance on the igloo door, "don't try to be heroes. If I come out, then good. If not, just get outta hereâ€”and don't ever come back."

He didn't turn to see their faces, just proceeded to the door. He then tossed the fragmentation grenade over his shoulder and Ken caught it in mid arc. Justin's voice then rebounded off the metal exterior of his igloo, his home. "Use the frag if they come for you. Pull the pin and toss in their general direction. Nothin' really much else to it."

"What about you?" Ken asked, flipping blonde strands of hair out from in front of his face.

"If they make it outside before _I _do, then I'm already deadâ€”so use it on them before they can get to _you._"

Justin brought the shotgun to bear and racked it once, the well-oiled assembly of parts working in perfect harmony. He reached for the shovel that was wedged into the door tabs. "Good luck!" Chris shouted.

Justin budged the shovel loose with one, swift but stroke of the shotgun and it clattered to the dirt. He waited.

There was no sound from the inside. No reaction, no creatures rapping their deadly appendages up against the walls at the onset of the noise he created. He figured all stealth was lost now, so he brought a knee up to his chest with one fell lunge and kicked the door in with his boot.

It flung open, the rusted out hinges croaking louder than ever just before the door frame impacted the inner wall with a _b-dang!_

The echo roiled across the plains.

He walked into the threshold, momentarily loitered there in half-shadow, then disappeared into darkness.

Once out of sight, Bill and Ken and Chris could only surmise that Justin was still alive by the sound of his soles impacting the floor, muffled at first from the cushioning dirt of the atrium floor, but soon it rang a true metallic ping as he transitioned into another room. A light flickered onâ€"good. He could now see inside there. Chris and the others jockeyed for a better view and found themselves inline with the entrance. But there was nothing. Justin was in too deep now. He had passed from their sight. All they could do was listen, prayâ€"and wait.

There was a loud _clang!_

"It's okay!" Justin said from the inside, his voice greatly attenuated by the network of metal bulkheads inside. "I opened another door, that's all."

They collectively exhaled, and waited even more.

Another _clang!_

"Mother-fucker!"

Justin fired off a shot. The noise made everyone outside flinch, the plains filled in an echoing chaos. Bill immediately fired up the Mongoose in case they had to flee. Chris and Ken rushed over to him just as well.

Another shot rang out and Chris mounted on the 'Goose behind Bill. Ken stood nearby, donning his ski gear in no time flat. They were at least ready. Ken brought the grenade to bear, ready to prime it and chuck it at the igloo entrance prior to departing.

Another shot rang out, followed by the distinctive, metallic declaration of a shotgun being racked. At least Justin was still alive and firing.

There was one final shot, doubly louder than all the others before it. And then it got very, very quiet.

Thenâ€"

A figure walked outside.

It seemed to meet the ambience of Traxus IX in perfect, dreadful slow motion.

It was Justin, caked in soot and strange liquid.

"What's going on?!" Ken demanded, holding the grenade in a threatening gesture high above his head. Justin walked ever closer to them. "I'm gonna pull the pin!" He just inched closer. "Say something, Justin!"

Justin stopped and crashed right where he stood. He was now sitting down, almost Indian style like he contemplated heavily on some thought.

They all eyed him suspiciously for a moment before Chris dismounted. He took a few steps towards Justin but kept his distance. "What happened?"

Justin wavered in a daze for at least a whole minute, the confusion on his face revealing nothing. He heard Chris, but whatever was running through his own mind had drowned out the world around him.

A moment went by and Chris posed the question again, "What's going on, Justin?"

As if suddenly revived, Justin slowly met Chris' eyes, pairing the voice with them, recognizing them.

"What happened?"

"The strangest thing."

Chris took a seat next to him, letting the clay stain the folds of his over garments. "Tell me what happened."

"Pete is"

"He's what, dead?"

The boy almost prefers this outcome, to hear that a friend hasn't suffered.

"Was. He's not Pete anymore."

"I'm sorry, but what do you mean? Exactly."

"Those creatures did something to him. They changed him."

Chris stood slowly. "How?"

"I can't explain. You're gonna have to go in and see for yourself."

"But Pete's suffering is done?"

"Done."

Chris cast a wary glance into the entrance and licked his lips. "And the creatures?"

"Dead. Killed 'em all. It's safe." Justin said, but noticed Chris was firmly planted where he was, not willing to venture inward. "And I

wedged the vent closed with the heater. Go in." Justin looked down again, finding a place for thought in the clay beneath his feet.

Chris sauntered up to the entrance, slowly. The entrance he'd been so willing to enter many times before, a place of comfort and shelter. Ken and Bill followed him. Justin remained.

The atrium was still aglow in the overhead fluorescence, nothing other to be seen for the present. But a strange, pungent odor was wafting throughout the air inside. Chris had smelled it before: raw sewage. It reminded him of his oldest memories as a child, living and growing up in an environment that most would deem wretched. Inner Colonial sewer systems were well-established and actually quite habitable with densely-populated refugee camps roaming about the subterranean passageways. Underground shopping wasn't the world-class experience, but it was underground—which meant it was free of annoying ads and free of tax and levies. It wasn't until people found themselves among the less robust infrastructure of the outer worlds that the situation became dire.

The brief nostalgia was replaced by the sight of the door ahead, dripping with strange fluid. The same fluid Justin was now wearing on most of his clothing. Chris stretched out his index finger and pushed the door open a few millimeters, the same door to the heater room where they first encountered the organisms.

About a dozen of them were there and torn to shreds, pieces of them strewn all about the deck. Their blood was everywhere. It pleased Chris in some savage, vengeful way, the way the pale liquid clung to every surface where it splashed. Like the childhood memory a moment before, his revelry only lasted a few seconds...and the stench came back ten-fold stronger with the door now open; a brisk draft that had originated somewhere in the plain outside circulated it all and Chris got the face-full. It smelled more awful than it looked. There was also a small amount of human blood speckled about every surface, almost no metal showing like some butcher's mural. He panned his gaze around and saw a single human body lying in the corner of the room. "Oh my God!" Chris gasped. "It's Pete!"

He rushed over and knelt down next to the ravaged body that was once Pete Barker's. His thick parka had been nearly torn to pieces from seemingly—himself. Pete's body had somewhat doubled in size. Limp and lifeless tentacles sprouted out from his torso and upper limbs, protruding straight through his clothing and twisting into jagged, vine-like appendages. His neck was a mangled mess, tilted at odd angles in two separate places such that it practically hung off his left shoulder. The upper vertebrae were clearly broken. A single, gaping hole defined his upper chest, undoubtedly from the blast of Justin's shotgun. And the most horrid feature was Pete's own face: it was morphed into pure hate and agony, hardly even discernable as their friend. His motionless hands were stiff and raked in a permanent clawing action, the Rigor Mortis fully set in despite him only being dead for two hours at most.

Chris stood up. "These things did this to him."

"—And it didn't take them long." Bill said. "I think we should leave. We've seen too much and they could break through again. _Let's go_."

Bill grabbed Chris by the collar, forcefully. Ken was not far behind, remaining only a few more seconds to survey the carnage, and perhaps to say his goodbyes.

They emerged outside, Justin still sitting in the dirt.

Chris sobbed only a little. "You put him out of his misery." he said rhetorically.

"You could say that." Justin said, standing himself up. "The bastard attacked me with my own shotgun."

"You mean the one we left inside?" Ken asked.

"Yep. He came at me with it. I had no choice but to put him down."

"That must've been the loud bang." Ken affirmed. "Two shots, simultaneously. Did he hit you?"

"Does it look like it?"

"You're incredibly lucky." Bill said. "That, or the Lord, our God, has a different path set for you."

"Yeah, yeah." Justin said, brushing the dirt off himself.

"There's so much blood in there, on you." Chris said. "What do we do about Pete? We can't just leave him in there. What are we gonna do?!"

"There comes a time in a man's life," Justin said, "and I've had plenty. Stop bitching and help me get Pete outside. We're gonna bury 'em."

The remnants of the day's sunlight had been vested in them laying Pete to rest. The process was long and tiresome. The hole had been dug and they lowered his appalling corpse into the pit, all the while their tortured nostrils baring the brunt of the sickening odors. Decaying flesh and alien secretions wafted upwards. They each stood there for a moment quietly reflecting to themselves, trying not to pay any heed to the nauseating olfactory punishment. Justin spoke up:

"Pete wasâ€¦" Justin looked around, searching the plains as if they inspired the best words here "â€¦a bastard." Everyone then glanced up with a sudden astonishment; the way their eyes locked onto Justin's suggested his choice of words hardly befitted the eulogy.

"â€¦But at least he was an honest bastard. He never lied, never sugar-coated _anything_."

Now, the others nodded in somber agreement.

"â€¦And he would've wanted us to say that about him. He was his own man. Nothing ever got the better of him, save for these fucking creepy-crawlies. But we got you, Pete," Justin bored his steely gaze down onto Pete's rudimentary headstoneâ€”a half-drunken pint of the finest Vodka they had in stock, "we got your vengeance for you. And

now you can rest easy."

Bill said, "Amen," and the others solemnly echoed.

Justin reached down and grabbed the shovel, the first gesture of closure and finality. He stole a scoopful of Traxus IX and hurled the orange-brown clump downwards, preparing Pete's body for a permanent dirt nap.

18. The Waiting Game

The Waiting Game

The last valiant rays of the sun strained through the blockade of clouds, blanketed over the hemisphere. All it translated to on the ground was just a mute, pale luminosity, slowly dying out. The orange motif of the land subdued to an insipid brown in the waning light. Visibility was ever more decreasing, the smog and the dust and the clouds taking reign over Traxus IX once again like clockwork. Justin stood for a moment and took in its melancholy beauty as the cold winds curved around his figure, thankful for the life he still had despite its wretched condition in this place. For any sight could be a splendor compared to none at all. Death—which was the only thing Pete Barker knew now. Justin looked away from Traxus IX's panorama in the last hours of the evening and placed his somber gaze to his feet where Pete's resting place beckoned, the rugged clay cast over it in chunks and pebbles. It was done.

By now, everyone else had retired to the igloo. The outer door was considerately left open for Justin by Chris. The light from the inside was now brighter than that of the ambience Justin lingered in. He trekked a few paces to the entrance and gave the lands one last look before closing the door.

He made sure it was locked before walking inside, memories coming to mind of how Pete habitually left it open. This would be the point at which everyone would wind down after a hard day's work and crash for the night. They'd wake some time the next day, and when they were coherent they'd drive to work when they felt like it. That was the norm.

Not so much now.

Justin strode inward to find everyone wide awake, sitting at their places of sleep rather than lying down and sleeping. It unnerved him just enough not to register on his features. "What's the deal?" he asked.

No one would look at him. They all just stared into empty space, off in their own neverland, detached from the present tense. At first, he thought it might be the flower showing up again, but after looking at Chris he confirmed it was not; Chris was rather reserved as well. Instead of wasting words and breath, Justin instead found a place in the dirt and took a seat himself. There they remained for a while, nothing uttered. Every now and again, someone would raise a water bottle and take a swig, the silence so prominent that one could actually hear another swallowing.

Eventually, Chris rolled over and settled into sleep on the floor.

Moments later, Bill cast his sight over to the little lad with a steadfast smile aimed in his direction. "At least one of us can sleep."

"I want to see how he got it and borrow it from him." Ken stated.

Bill didn't answer. He was done talking.

Pete was done.

The day was done.

â€|And it was time for them to let the next one arrive.

* * *

><p>Strangely, Bill and Ken awoke almost simultaneously as if Siamese twins. They regarded one another with brief, curt nods as they rose. Bill looked around: Chris was still passed out on the floor. He hadn't even changed sleeping position. Justin was already wide awake on the couch, a comic book in his hands. Though, he wasn't reading it, at least not at the moment.<p>

"So," Bill said almost jovially, "when are we going to work?"

Justin took his time in answering. He began to open his mouth, but then checked his himself, placing his vision back into the comic book.

"â€|If you're not going, can we take the Mongoose?" Bill asked.

Justin looked up squarely at Bill, perfectly straight-faced. He reached out and placed the comic book on the cushion beside him. "Don't do that."

But Ken replied, "I can't take being her today, Justin. I know you probably could handle it, but I gotta go."

"What's got your panties in a bunch?" Justin asked, still stoic.

"I need to get away from this place. I need to get my mind off things."

"Fine. Go ahead, leave for the city and work a shift. I can't stop you. But you're not taking the 'Goose."

Ken held back his anger, and tried to suppress the fire behind his eyes. "Why?"

"Because if the Kaiser's men come looking for me, I'm gonna make sure I leave myself an out."

"Oh shit!" Ken shouted. "That's right! I forgot all about that!"

"They would actually come and look for us?" Bill asked.

Chris awoke from the now-loud conversation, wincing as he turned his

neck in the direction of the noises. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Justin ignored him, looked back to Bill and said, "Of course they'll be looking for us. They want the resources of the city now. And I'm the best tool they have in getting them. They'll come to the city first and look for me. They'll look for you too, so don't go that way."

Ken asked, "So why did you make them that deal in the first place?"

"Because I had to get in the Kaiser's hideout to get a gun, remember? You don't just barge into that kinda place without good reason."

"So what will we do about this?" Bill asked.

Justin didn't take much time to answer. "We're gonna lay low and play the waiting game."

"And you're certain no one knows of this location?" Bill asked.

"You can never be certain of anything. But we are a good drive from the city. Hopefully, if they come this way, they'll get tired of driving and give up."

"And that's what you're banking on?" Ken asked lividly.

"There's no better solution."

"What about hiding out at Solomon's? He's self-sustaining. Water, plants, et cetera."

"Too far of a journey. I'd need to visit the city for fuel, and thus chance running into Sergei's men. That's an unacceptable risk."

"Right." Ken smiled. "We can't go to Solomon's because we can't go to the city for fuel. So that means we can't even go to the city to get food and the most basic suppliesâ€¦then we're fucked."

Justin bit his lower lip and considered Ken's words, perhaps a morbid acceptance hiding behind his eyes. He then cast his sights to the door of the heater room, where they were violently introduced to the creatures that killed Pete. "Maybe not." he replied.

"What's your plan now?"

"Pretty simple, really."

* * *

><p>Chris was outside at mid day, perched atop the 'Goose, waiting.<p>

His eyes were level with the horizon, sweeping side to side over and over again like a satellite dish on auto-track. As if existence here wasn't already monotonous enough, now Justin tasked him with this tedious duty.

Bill stepped outside and joined Chris. "See anything yet?"

"Nothing." Chris replied sourly. "Why am I doing this again?"

"Because we have to know when the Kaiser's men come this way."

"_If_ they come this way."

"Yes."

"Figures that I get the noble job of lookout duty."

"Heh, don't worry, Chris. We're splitting it up in shifts. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Yeah, another coat. It's damned cold out here."

"No problem, I'll be right back." Bill left Chris and stepped inside the igloo.

Chris retrained his vision back onto the northern horizon, where their enemies were most likely to encroach from. Hopefully, visibility would be good for the next few days. Sergei said that in two days, his men would call upon Justin for his City 17 benefits. One day had gone by already. That left one more, assuming the Kaiser stuck by his schedule—and his word. Then again, the Kaiser was the King of criminals on Traxus IX; he didn't hold the kind of credibility for anyone to take him at his word. Chris hoped this was the case, that they had more time before the search for Justin was on. The hornet's nest was surely shaken now. But more than just their own little ordeal, Chris thought about Traxus IX itself. The whole planet was about to change, on the verge of all-out civil war, yet again. Chris imagined all the stories Justin told him coming to life: towns and homes and cities on fire. Blackened, charred vehicles and corpses and hordes of madmen screaming wildly into the answer-less plains. And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

It was going to happen. The Kaiser of these dreadful types had been building up strength all these years through recruitment, acquisition of military hardware through his black market channels, and God only knew what else. It was all coming to boil inside this pressure cooker of a planet.

Some men only seek power.

Bill approached Chris' side with a heavy parka and a bottle of water. "I thought you could use a drink, the kind that is not mind-altering." he smiled.

Chris smiled back. "Thanks."

"Sure."

"Bill?"

"Yes."

"Do you think we'll be alright?"

"I tend to think so. God has a way of shielding those not in harm's way."

"We're safe here, right?"

Bill leaned up against the handle bars and relaxed his stance. "Well, we are a good ways from the factories. Most of the towns are close by them. That's where I fear the worst will happen. Now, I do not know where the Kaiser will strike or where his enemies reside, but I do know that if we play it smart and we work together, we'll survive the next war."

"How long do you think it will last?"

"If anything like the previous, then not very long. We just have to make sure we stay indoors if the New Model Army decides to venture planet-side."

"What if we run out of food?"

"We'll have to sacrifice and fast."

"Like a good Christian would?"

"Indeed." Bill smiled.

"So if Justin and Sergei got in a fight, who do you think would win?"

"You mean a man-to-man fight?"

"Yeah. Who's your money on?"

"This would probably never happen, you know."

"I know, but I was just curious."

"It pains me to say, but I would place my bet on Sergei winning that fight."

"Really? Why?"

"Sergei has had to fight all his life. He's probably very good at it."

"But Justin was trained by the best. He's a Marine."

"Was a Marine."

"Once a Marine, always a Marine."

"Sure, but Justin's gotten a bit rusty over the years."

Justin stepped outside. He strode over to Bill and Chris, who'd stopped conversing that instant.

"If you want, Kid, go inside and rest. I'll take over for a while."

"Okay."

Chris stepped back into the igloo. Once he was out of sight, Bill said, "You know he's very scared."

"I know."

"You think we'll make it outta this one like last time?"

"I'm tired of everyone looking to me for answers."

"I didn't expect you to have the answer, Justin. I simply asked what you thought."

Justin breathed in a full breath of Traxus IX, scanning the horizon with a squinted gaze.

"Well, then I think I don't know."

19. Expected Guests

Expected **__Guests**_

Night had already fallen some time ago. Hours had gone by as everyone rotated in and out of watch duty. It was now pre-dawn.

The igloo was silent, all occupants fast asleep. Outside, patches of frostâ€"half water and half chemicalâ€"clung to every surface as the veil of night had all but disappeared. Bill was faithfully perched atop the Mongoose amidst the first rays of the sun. It was poised just above the horizon, situated in such a way that the light was ducted in between orange-brown clay and lifeless-grey cloud. Rare, heavenly illumination reached him. It was a rather still and serene sight, one seldom seen by any of them being such an early hour. Normally, they'd wake up some time from now and get ready for slaving away at the factory.

This 'duty' was something Bill had definitely not been looking forward to; he was dead tired from all the waiting. But the current view was quite worth the nuisance. What was more valuable, sleep? Or this uncommon beauty on display? Bill had it in him to walk inside and wake everyone, to share this rare instant. Soon, however, it would rise higher like an ant on a string and disappear just as anything beautiful did. And everyone else would probably shun him out anyways, simply refusing to give up slumber. Indeed, Bill had the sun all to himself, even if it was just for a few moments. Maybe it made this moment all the more precious. For the time being he basked in the brilliant dawn with a steadfast smile, staring into the handy work of God.

He traced the pure-gold sphere with his smiling gaze all the way up until it passed into the clouds, out of sight.

He heard a rustling sound and then the door opened, the predictable metal-on-metal grinding noise ruining the silence around him. Bill spun around on his seat. It was Justin, always the earliest riser out of them all.

Bill's disposition hadn't changed, the smile from earlier etched on

his face. "Good morning, Justin. Did you sleep any better?"

"Same as always." Justin said as he approached. "I don't feel too much like shit this morning, so that's good."

"Indeed. I feel a little better as well."

"Hopefully that shit has run its course."

Bill paid no mind to Justin's coarse language and resumed his stare ahead, the clouds now backlit by the imprisoned sun rays. "I meant to ask you—what should we do if the Kaiser's men _do _show up here?"

Justin simply answered, "We've got two shotguns. And a frag grenade."

"Hmm." Bill grunted, not really offering any definitive reply.

Justin knew perfectly well that Bill would not fight anyone, not even Sergei's men. Not even if they attacked Bill himself. But Justin still let Bill in on his strategy in the event they were found.

"Me and Ken will use the shotguns. I'm not sure, but he seems like he can handle a weapon. I'll probably give Chris the grenade. He seems like the most level-headed person here, besides you of course, but you're against violence so he's my only option; so Chris will be the last resort in case we all get iced."

"That's it? That's your plan?"

"Yeah. Got a better one?"

"Well—no. I'm just wondering if there is a better way to handle that type of situation."

Justin didn't reply, but still looked at Bill with a prompting gaze, half-heartedly listening. He lit up a cigarette.

"For instance," Bill continued, "you could just agree to help them since that is what you promised."

"That's the whole point; I was never going to help them. I just needed a shotgun so we could get the igloo back."

"—You really didn't think this through. One thing any man can learn, even a man without faith: never make decisions in the heat of the moment."

"There was no thinking to be done! We needed a weapon and we had to do whatever it took to get one! So what the fuck?"

"Please, Justin, calm yourself. You'll wake the others."

"Fuck it! I'll wake them up if I God damn feel like it!"

"Please, don't use the Lord's name like that."

"You know—you and all your Bible talk—it makes me wanna fuckin'

punch a baby. Lord this, Jesus that. When are you gonna wake up and smell the chemicals? Jesus, your God? He fucking left this place decades ago! We are betrayed here, brother. We are beached!"

Bill was speechless. He stared back at Justin, taken back from his sudden outburst. The spiral into this bitter rage was somewhat warranted given the atrocities inherent in life on Traxus IX and all they had been through together, but to speak of God the way Justin had just done...was utterly blasphemous. Bill held his unyielding gaze on Justin for another minute, finally breaking the stare with a few blinks, surmising that Justin knew not what he had just done.

Justin spoke again, this time more civilly. "I mean...you'd think by now you'd get it, Bill. He's just gonna let us roll on and on down here until the entire universe has forgotten about us, and we ain't _never_ getting off this planet, Bill."

"â€|I cannot speak with you right now. I'm going inside."

"Yeah, go inside. Pray to the Holy Spirit and get us off Traxus Nine. Ask him for a deadline too because I haven't seen any real results after all this time spent on your knees."

Bill turned the other cheek and walked back into the igloo as Chris passed him on the way out, fully awake. "What's wrong?" Chris asked.

"Justin isn't in a good mood, that's all." Bill replied.

Chris saw Justin through the open door standing in the dirt plain and looking into the sky, shoulders slumped as if thwarted by the view itself. He approached Justin's side.

"I'm not in the mood to talk, kid." Justin walked away towards the water pallet.

"Can I come with you?"

Justin stopped, turned around and was about to order Chris inside but he couldn't upon seeing the kid's face, so young, helpless and naïve. He was clueless, scared and needed someone to talk to. It shouldn't be Justin. Anyone but him. But it seemed there was no choice. Chris depended on him. Justin knew that now.

"Fine. What is it?"

Chris tagged along Justin's side like a family's lap dog, looking up at him the entire trek to the pallet. "I heard what you two were talking about. So what are we doing if the Kaiser's men show up and there are too many of them? What do we do?"

"There's only two options then: fight or submit." Justin tore open more of the cellophane wrap and grabbed some water, offloading a few bottles into Chris' arms. "And I don't plan on submitting."

"Why not? What's the worst that could happen? You give him the supplies he needs until the war is over. Then, it's back to business as usual."

"No, it doesn't work like that. Once you submit, the mouth of the monster just sinks deeper and deeper into you. Once I provide for him, he's always gonna want it. And I'm not spending the rest of my god-forsaken life as a two-bit peddler."

"Better than dying."

Justin grabbed extra water for himself and slung the tarp back over the pallet. "There's a lot of things better than dying, but working for an asshole ain't one of them. It's already bad enough here. God damn it, I shoulda never smoked that shit." Justin marched back to the front side of the igloo, laden with bottled water in his arms. Chris followed.

"So then we're fighting. And possibly dying."

"I will be. You do whatever you want."

"I can't believe this. I can't believe you're being so selfish."

"That's life, kid." Justin rounded the corner and suddenly found himself face to face with Ken. Bill stood idly by in the background near the door. "What now?"

Ken said, "What's this I hear about you getting all suicidal?"

Justin didn't answer. He simply eyed Bill beyond Ken's shoulder. "Step aside."

"No." Ken replied. "I wanna know what your plan is before they come this way."

"You already know my plan. I'm gonna stay here and kill every fuckin' one of them."

"And how do you think you're doing that? You'll be outnumbered and outgunned, holed up in this metal kill-box with no way out of it."

"He does have a point." Bill said.

"So does my dick."

Ken stepped back into Justin's view. "Just how long do you think you'll last?"

"Not how long I'll last—how long they'll last."

-

"You still haven't told any of us your plan." Ken said. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, still waiting for an answer from Justin—who was neatly stacking water bottles around the floor of the sleeping quarters. "Fine. If you're gonna make this your final resting place, we're gonna take the 'Goose and leave."

Justin kept on rearranging the state of the room as if time for spring cleaning on some other world. His face was level and cold.

"You do that and I'll blast you off it."

"What?!"

"You heard me."

"Since you're sentencing yourself to certain death, what does it matter if we take the 'Goose? God damnit, tell me your fucking plan!!"

Justin wasn't perturbed in the least by Ken's anger, just kept on placing water bottles at seemingly logical intervals. "Hang on, let me finish."

Ken huffed a furious exhalation of boiled breath, and waited.

Justin carried on for another minute, not knowing, or caring that he was trying Ken's patience. He finished with the last water bottle and stood up to face Ken. "Like I told you yesterdayâ€¦it's very simple."

"Justin, two shotguns and a grenade isn't gonna take care ofâ€¦"

"â€¦Shut up about shotguns! If my plan works, we won't have to use weapons against them."

"You said you were going to kill them."

"Not with shotguns or a grenade." Justin nodded over to the heater room. "With them."

Ken's eyes widened. "You can't let those things out!"

"I can, and I will."

"What about us?!"

"We'll be fine, that's what the shotguns are for."

-

"So," Justin said with a resolute smile directed to the northern plain, "Keep watching the horizon. We need to have a good amount of warning before they get here."

"Alright, Justin. But we're still doing this in shifts." Chris replied.

"That's fine, but there better not be any slacking off. You get complacent and our only shot at this is gone." Justin looked at Ken and Bill. "That goes for all of you."

Justin stepped closer to the Mongoose and handed Chris a pair of binoculars.

Chris took them from Justin and carefully performed an inspection, not really knowing what he was inspecting for. Certainly not its attributes, like fully multi-coated optics, image stabilization, and digital collimation controls. He was oblivious to the engineering

behind Assisted Optics. He just made sure the eyecups and the lenses were dust free with a wipe from his undershirt.

Chris brought the binoculars to bear, jostling them over his face to obtain a comfortable spot over his eye sockets. Automatically, internal gyroscopes whined to life, steadying the image in his unsteady hands. Chris leaned over the handle bars and buttressed his weight through his bent elbows and swept the optics side to side, unaware to the fact that he could see 2000 yards out with a 500-foot field of view.

"How come we didn't use these yesterday?" he asked, not really expecting any answer.

-

"The Kaiser said, 'Two days from now'." Justin quoted.

"Guess he's not a man of his word after all." Ken offered.

Justin, Bill and Ken had gathered around Chris at the Mongoose in the death throes of the late afternoon. In a matter of two Traxus IX hours, the sun would fall below the plains and there'd be no light; the binoculars would be useless.

"Does this thing have night vision?"

"That thing is a hundred years old." Justin replied.

"Guess it was an option on this model." Chris mumbled.

"Tomorrow is another day." Bill announced.

"You're sure they won't come at night?" Chris asked.

"Visibility is very limited at night." Bill replied. "They wouldn't come at this hour if they were intent on finding Justin."

"What if they're already on their way?" Chris proposed.

No one answered him.

"Are we all done in the igloo?" Justin asked Ken.

"All ship-shape. It looks as though we'd all be in the heater room, warming up or something."

"Good. Bill, you've got first shift at sunrise. Just like this mornâ€œ"

"â€œWait!" Chris shouted.

Everyone wheeled back around to the Northern plain with wide eyes.

"What do you see?" Bill asked.

"It's them, it's gotta be."

"Give me those." Justin said, snatching them from Chris.

He peered into the eyecups, adjusting the collimation control to

compensate for the lack of ambient light. He gave one eyecup a rotary spin to focus inâ€|and he saw them. "Fuck me, right?"

"Heading this way?" Bill asked, hesitant to hear the answer.

"Everyone get ready!"

Chris jumped off the ATV as everyone else scrambled to their predetermined places.

It all had to go down perfect. Otherwise, they were surely dead.

20. Unexpected Guests

..._**Unexpected Guests**_

Justin quickly ran inside while Bill and Ken took their places on the igloo's Southern face. Justin glanced over the shoulder before running further in, the shotgun held tightly in his grasp. He cleared the atrium then slowed to a walk. Before entering darkness, he confirmed that the other two would be hidden from the Northward attackers. His grip tightened along with a hard look to the heater room ahead. There in total darkness was the vent pipe. He waited for his sights to adjust. The outward steel grate had been mangled beyond repair by the creatures that were somewhere below, perfectly silent and patient. The improvised barricade was still wedged inward, but it was now to be undone. He had prepared himself for the worst of consequences, then with one swift jab of the butstock he dislodged the heater unit free of the gaping hole. Deep inside, from down under some place where the vent pipe descended to, he heard a swift clamour of movement, then a _clack!_

A flutter of adrenaline originated from somewhere in the pit of his stomach and his body exploded with speed.

On his way out of the heater room, Justin grabbed hold of the door and slammed it shut with running momentum alone. He sacrificed not a fraction of a stride as he stormed toward the entrance.

The rough, rank air of Traxus IX reached his nostrils as he emerged, and he was somehow thankful he got the pleasure of its odor once again. He glanced to the North. He felt he couldn't have been seen at this distance, then took his place with Bill and Ken further back. A brief moment went by as Justin regained his center, and he peered around the corner of the igloo's Southernmost tip, bringing the binoculars back for a final assessment: on the horizon were four Mongooses. Two of them were doubly occupied, a total of six riders. Six to fourâ€"and these riders were undoubtedly better supplied.

Surely outmatched, just as Ken predicted. At fifteen-hundred meters and closing, Justin could make out a variety of firearms sheathed inside holsters mounted to their vehicle frames. They approached at full throttle, Justin knew the sound of a wide-open manifold.

Justin, Bill and Ken each jockeyed for a view around the

igloo.

"This'll either work well, or we'll die fighting." Ken surmised as he gauged their numbers.

"It has to work." was Justin's only reply.

"Why so sure?" Ken asked, reaching for the binoculars.

Justin handed them over. "It's fucking idiot-proof."

"Overly simple, that's for sure. We're putting a lot of faith in those creatures showing up again. And their timing has to be spot-on."

"True, but they're hungry. This is just an ordinary bait and hook." Justin smiled.

Ken grunted as a sign of approval in the leader, or his faith in their leader, then returned the binoculars. He glanced towards Chris, who remained on the Mongoose in the open, ruminating over his practiced routine again and again as the enemies sped ever closer to the igloo. Ken couldn't be sure, but he felt as though Chris' determination to live would certainly outweigh his own fear for the moment, but his hands were shaking. For now, he saw Chris tightly wrap them tightly around the handle bar.

The incoming vehicles were now fully audible, echoes of high-pitched exhausts registering about the barren lands. The combined dissonance of noise and dust emanating from the Mongoose quartet gradually became louder and clearer until they were only a Gravball field's distance—Chris' point of no return. A prisoner to fate.

Justin and the others crouched lower and slowly withdrew out of sight.

Chris sat perfectly still as they approached, closer and closer. He donned a helmet and flipped down the tinted visor to conceal his frightened eyes. "I can do this." he muttered.

He could now make out the whites of their eyes.

They finally pulled up to the igloo on a hot vector. They didn't engage any brakes until just shy of the entrance, each of them skidding to a brisk halt.

Four of them dismounted, leaving engines idling. A pair of them remained behind, standing at pillion. The leader of this pack strolled to Chris, removing a pair of mirrored, full-faced sunglasses as he neared. He was very big and very tall, even by grown-up standards. Chris could not have mistaken this man for any other; it was the one Sergei called 'Paulie'. It was the same thug, the same massive-framed ogre that attacked him a fortnight ago with the crippled, old man. Chris swallowed hard, thankful for the fact that it didn't show through his thick parka. He had a vague idea of the strength that a man this size possessed, but the mere sight of him on approach was blood-curdling.

Paulie placed one hand on Chris' handlebars, steadying his colossal weight on them. "I know you." he said in a high-pitched voice.

Chris was taken aback, almost losing sight of the plan Justin set forth. If Chris had no eyesight, he would've thought this giant was a young boy merely by the sound. Unbeknownst to Chris was the fact that his unusually soprano tone was resultant of consuming too many anabolic pharmaceuticals. Steroids, either injected or consumed metabolically had profound effects in nearly all physiological traits.

Paulie smiled, showing a slight amount of rotten-yellow teeth. He bent down and practically became nose to nose with Chris, revealing a close-up look of his puke-yellow scleras.

Over the years of steroid abuse, Paulie's liver slowly leaked bile into the rest of his body so much that it stained the very whites of his eyes. The combination of this, his freakishly high-pitched voice and his plastic-textured skin was enough to revolt even the creatures down below, Chris assumed.

"You're the kid from that one night."

Chris recoiled his hands and didn't answer. There was nothing he could say. He could only stick to the plan.

Paulie studied him up and down while licking his lips, didn't even try to hide what perversion emanated from his mind. He then inched closer and placed his hands on Chris' helmet, removing it slowly, revealing Chris' own eyes. Paulie tossed the helmet to the ground carelessly. Next, he ran a gargantuan paw through Chris' hair and slowly caressed it downward to the side of his tender neck, exposing an even wider, more perverted smile across his face.

"Damnit!" Chris screamed "Why does everyone touch my head? Get the fuck off me!"

"Well, you do have very nice hair. I remember when I was a boy your age. I had hair just as nice as yours, but this place sort of wears on you after a bit of time. I didn't catch you going somewhere, did I?"

"Yes." Chris managed to say. He wasn't sure at this point whether to run or cry or just hit the man as hard as he could. Every square inch of him was aggravated, his skin crawling, but any of his desired reactions would only worsen the current predicament, surely ruin the plan. "We were just about to head to the factory."

Paulie instantly withdrew his hand. Suddenly, his smile disappeared. "Don't think so. Not today. Where is your man, Reid?"

Chris pointed the way into the igloo like he had practiced, putting on the most sincere face he could. "Through there. In the heater room. The farthest door. He's not happy, so you'd better be nice."

The large man gave Chris a queer smile before placing his glasses back on, saying, "Thank you" before he preceded his three cohorts into the entrance. The typical loud, groaning noise signaled Justin and the others in hiding beyond the corner that the enemy had entered, but the two standing silently pillion remained where they were.

Chris silently cursed. Two of them were still outside, and they were armed. That meant complications, of which Justin was utterly unaware of. Already, things weren't going according to plan.

Now, Paulie and his goons were inside, unseen by Chris anymore. All he could hear was the sound of their footsteps pattering against the dirt floor of the atrium. It would be any moment now. The creatures would come out from somewhere underground and begin their merciless mutilation like they had done to Pete. Chris frowned for a moment. He rather enjoyed what little time he shared with Pete.

He placed all his attention ahead to the igloo. He had to be ready.

Clanging sounds rang out as Paulie and the others ransacked the place. Faint, white glows emanated. They had turned the lights on. After another moment of them rustling around, all grew silent. Chris waited, conscious to keep his breathing steady and in check, readying himself for what was to come.

Nothing happened.

Paulie emerged from the doorway, a bitter smile on his face. Not like the perverted, grotesque smile from before. No, this one spoke of anger more than anything else. His search turned up inconclusive. The creatures could probably smell his filth half a klick away, figured he wasn't worth consuming.

Now Chris was all alone in Paulie's sights. "You lied to me, kid. I don't know about you, but I don't like being lied to. Why do little shits like you always have to make things hard? You can't just understand who's in charge. That's not hard to do at all." He stood there in the doorway, casually waving his hand around. "So which way did he go? If you tell me the truth this time, I promise I'll go easy on you."

Chris had to think of something in the midst of his colossal failure. _Justin's_ colossal failure. Hopefully, Justin and Ken would rush out from hiding and blast Paulie to hell.

It wasn't to be, though.

Paulie strode forth towards Chris, the most gut-wrenching smirk on his face. Chris flinched in terror on his seat. The rest of Paulie's men mirrored his move, the most menacing body language as they closed in on him. Then—

A single _bang_ erupted from inside the igloo. So robust a sound that it cast a single, reverberating, chest-rattling echo unto the plains.

Paulie spun around and faced the structure. "Well, what the fuck was that?" He then glanced at his partners.

"Sounded like something fell. I think I bumped into it in there earlier."

"Bullshit."

The man's shoulders shrugged in reply, and Chris could sense his fear.

"You said you checked the whole place!" Paulie shouted.

"I did!" another replied.

It resounded again, this time even louder.

"Well, go see what the hell is making that noise!" Paulie ordered.

Paulie's subordinate started out towards the entrance with baby steps. He could only manage a few rearward glances, then Paulie leveled a gun at him. He then advanced quicker inside.

Before he could continue on, a series of staccato rattles reverberated deeper beyond. It tickled the metal walls and pounced over the dirt floor. The entire igloo, it seemed, was buzzing with innumerable activity. The noise only grew louder. It was almost deafening the longer it went on, the plains becoming just one, single echo. Until everything surrounding them came alive with reflected noise.

Everyone but Paulie lost their bearing in the pandemonium. "I said get in there!"

The other clenched his jaw, turned around and hesitantly made his way to the entrance.

He accomplished exactly two steps.

Then a tidal wave of multi-legged creatures materialized into view past the entrance and swarmed over him. He was engulfed in a fraction of a second. Nearly every creature had a go at him, stabbing at every inch of his body with their tentacles. He stopped moving as they swept by. Paulie's mouth dropped, then his body twitched into action. By instinct, he backpedaled and took aim.

Chris was awestruck at how many there were—"much more than before. He wasted not even one more second knowing full well what they were capable of; he bolted to Justin's position. Paulie and his remaining men outside tracked him with their gun sights, but the other sights and sounds from the creatures scrambling for the closest human being within reach pulled their attention away from him. They fired their handguns and they fired their assault rifles full-auto at the creatures in some futile effort to survive, but their panicked aim accomplished little. The two men at pillion exchanged glances then took the driver seats of the ATVs; without so much as a glance back to that horrific scene, they fled in the direction of the city.

Paulie, too busy fending off the flood of critters to notice two of his men cowering away, backtracked and gave up some of his ground that the creatures instantly accepted. They were an act of God, a flood of flesh and tentacle. He fired round after round as they continually rushed him, those creatures still living crawling over their fallen kin. His shots were well-placed compared to his lesser-disciplined men, who were now in short supply. The creatures popped like balloons each time he scored a hit, taking two or three

extra to hell. He looked beyond the swarm of them, to where his first man went down. He was now standing.

Chris reached Justin. Bill and Ken were there too, watching this spectacle from around the container's corner. It was horrifying to watch as the creatures overran Paulie's men, taking them down with ease. It wasn't a quick death as each of them could make out Paulie's men twitching and thrashing around in the clay. It was only a matter of time before they claimed Paulie.

"As soon as he goes," Justin said, pointing to Paulie, "we're gonna clean up. Shotguns are just what we need for this kinda work." He gave a thumb's up and Ken replied back with an identical gesture. "Bill and Chris, wait here. If we go down," Justin looked to Chris, "frag us. I'm not going out like them."

Chris nodded, then his eyes widened in the utmost of horror as he looked ahead. At a loss for words, he pointed.

Justin, Bill and Ken wheeled around to see that one of Paulie's men, who had fallen, was now upright and transformed into something strange and horrific beyond anyone's imagining.

At first, the once fallen thug reminded Justin of how Pete looked after the creatures had their way with him. Because the man ahead was distorted beyond recognition, the skin bubbled and blotchy, oozing with puss. Vine-like appendages shot forth from the swollen extremities. But the face was still barely discernable, still barely human even though it became twisted in pure agony, the likes of which Justin, nor any of them, had ever known. None of them could believe their eyes.

It looked around and laid its eyes on Paulie—the last man standing. Then, it did something that chilled all those still living to the core.

The monster that was once a human let out the most awful, horror-inducing shriek unto the planet. A roar that filled the plains with pure, unimaginable terror for miles in every direction. In perfect, pointless rage, it charged. Paulie turned in its direction just before it was right on top of him, temporarily stunned by the speed it possessed, his eyes widening in shock. What was to follow was the most ghastly experience anyone had ever witnessed—even Justin. The humanoid monstrosity reared one of its upper limbs far back, formerly a human arm, stretching it so far aft that the ball and socket joint of the shoulder popped out of place, only necrotic tissue holding it together. Instantaneously, the arm elongated into several whip-like tentacles as if whatever creature took a hold of this host body could rearrange DNA as it saw fit. The whips shot forward in a blur of violent motion like tree branches in a thunderstorm, impacting the side of Paulie's chest. They slammed into Paulie with a _thwack! _They tore right through his thick over garments, right through every layer and lacerated the skin underneath. Blood spurted out of the gashes. As if more machine than living organism, the humanoid then created a similar appendage out of the other arm in a split second, soon whacking away at him in double-time, over and over again until Paulie lost about a gallon's worth of blood from the rib cage. It all happened in a span of ten seconds. Paulie could barely cover his face from the blows of the many tentacles lashing out at him, much less stand his own

ground.

Bones started to crack.

It was a one-sided fight.

Justin, Chris, everyone, actually sympathized with Paulie as he literally got mauled and pummeled to death. Another moment went by, and gradually he sank lower and lower to his knees, the lifeblood of him steadily draining out from his ever-widening wounds. His face was now the target. Soon, he didn't possess the will to keep his guard up in his punching bag-like defense. On the other hand, the creature carried on at the same pace and furiously hacked away at Paulie's flesh as if preprogrammed to do so.

It was quite clear that Paulie was on the verge of death. As if he knew it himself, he let out his last words unto the worldâ€¦

"Why?"

His cry was disheartening. Ken even had the gumption to run out and try to rescue him. It was too late.

Paulie slumped over and fell to the dirt, motionless.

The creature craned its neck high into the air, howling some sort of primitive, animalistic cry to victory. It then settled into a gurgling growl, satisfied with its destruction to life.

Justin and everyone else behind the igloo kept still and silent, their eyes glued to the lone humanoid and the carnage all about the ground, spellbound by the aftermath. Lifeless bodies, severed limbs, splattered blood and pulverized organs were strewn everywhere in chaotic arrangement, a blood bath gone insane. The whole slaughter took less than two minutes. The group just stared blankly at the scene and tried to make any sort of sense out of what happened, though that was impossible. No human could be so strong. Everything happened so fast. All they knew was that once the creatures assimilated a body, they morphed into the perfect killing machine. They possessed superhuman strength, could form weapons out of their own flesh and they could take a counter-attack quite well and shrug it off. They were deathly fast. It made Justin think twice about jumping out from hiding and cleaning up. He began thinking of alternate ways to still come out on top.

He turned to face Chris. "Give me the 'nade."

Chris handed it over quickly, his dilated pupils ever fixed on the monster standing deathlike still. About a dozen of the crawling variety milled about around it. It almost looked as though they were dancing; they pulsated in unison. "Strange." Chris mumbled.

"Alright," Justin whispered, "here's the plan. Me and Ken are going to rile them up, get them to follow us a bit. When all the bastards are tightly grouped, I'm gonna give them a shrapnel surprise. Everyone stay down and get some kind of cover. This frag has a wide kill radius to it. Just stay here when it happens. Ken, let me know when you're ready."

"I just need one minute." Ken replied, still calming his nerves.

Justin peered around the corner again, satisfied that none of the creatures noticed them. "Just let me know when."

They all kept their places, watching the monsters lingering about as if they had no purpose. No purpose, other than to kill. Violently.

Everything was relatively calm for the moment on the verge of their last, desperate act...but then another misfortune befell the group.

The two remaining bodies that were still thrashing about on the ground instantly rose to their feet. Another pair of the fallen had just joined the ranks of the superhuman killing machines. Within a matter of seconds, their bodies changed. They nearly doubled in size. The dermal tissues tinged a sickly, glistening greenish-brown. And the same, dreadful tentacles of all the others sprouted from their limbs as well. They were now tainted by the parasitic creatures. And just like the humanoid that destroyed Paulie, they observed their world through fresh sets of eyes, and then settled into gurgling growls, no function for the time being.

It was a tranquil sort of violence they held, able to transform it into a hail of death and disfigurement in a fleeting moment if they so desired. It was awe-inspiring in its own right. But now, those still living had a challenge greater than before; they were dealing with a threat far more dangerous than just six men with guns. They now had to somehow kill three superhuman zombies bent on total destruction to anything that moved. Just then, as if things couldn't have gotten any worse, one of the crawling creatures tore a hole into Paulie's back, inviting itself inside his torso one tentacle at a time. It soon disappeared inside his corpse. He twitched for a moment. It soon led to brutal, sadistic thrashing. And in the next instant, he turned as well.

The once-human Paulie rose to its feet, its back broken from the intense convulsions just a moment ago. How it stood upright was a mystery, one better left unsolved.

Four ferocious, cruel, unyielding superhuman monsters now ruled the immediate area around Justin, Bill, Ken and Chris. Their misfortune had just compounded four-fold.

Justin turned from the sight and assessed the others. Ken was still solid by the look of it, right on the same page as Justin and strictly concerned about survival. Chris? Justin couldn't really tell. The boy was surely afraid, but who wouldn't be? Only time would tell if Chris was up to the task of survival. And Bill—Bill would have to be looked after. His fighting skills were about as useless as tits on a boar. In fact, they were non-existent. _Poor bastard_, Justin thought.

"Alright, Ken, you ready?"

He nodded at Justin. Shaken at first, but he grabbed a hold of reality, mentally prepping himself in his own way for whatever was

next.

"In threeâ€|twoâ€|one. Go!"

The foursome of zombies jerked in their direction as they blasted from cover. Atrocious roars nearly made them think twice.

Justin racked the shotgun and leveled it at the torso of the one that claimed Paulie. He squeezed the trigger and a hail of buckshot slammed into it, staggering it back. But that was all it did. It was still standing. The other humanoids rushed to meet them halfway.

"Get point-blank shots if you wanna make this work!" Justin shouted over Ken's gunfire as the distance closed.

"I know!" Ken simply responded.

Justin flanked left, tracing a wide semicircle around the zombies and the critters beneath their feet. This momentarily drew attention to himself, leaving Ken mostly unabated to cut right into the fray and blast a multitude of them from their unmonitored flank. It workedâ€|for the most part. The critters down below weren't all that quick, but the zombies rushed Justin all too fast, and soon he was on the retreat, blind-firing over his shoulder as he sprinted fast back to cover. Watching this frantic maneuver, Bill and Chris assumed the inevitable. Justin, with zombies in tow, was on a straight path to their hiding spot. Shit.

Bill and Chris rose to their feet and bolted in any feasible direction other than where Justin came from. They turned around and maneuvered to run the perimeter of the igloo to get the hell out of the way; for they had no weapons at all.

Ken followed the horde of zombies as they chased after Justin with flailing limbs. He shot off about three rounds, scoring hits on two of the zombies' backsides. They became temporarily stunned, stopped themselves, and turned to face Ken. The zombies paused in that position for a moment, and Ken could see that the critters had embedded themselves in the center of the torso, taking up a permanent residence there. He fired two sequential rounds at point-blank in their stupor, right towards their hearts. They each fell one after the other, ribbons of puss spewing everywhere and bodies crumpling to the ground with a series of thuds. Ken reloaded as he ran after Justin yet again; there were still two zombies and a clutch of critters after him.

Justin ran his way around the perimeter of the igloo, soon on Bill and Chris' heels. The zombies were right behind, unrelenting in their murderous chase.

"Don't follow us, Justin!" Chris shouted, barely any wind inside him as they rounded the north side of the igloo. They'd inevitably do a complete 360. Soon, they'd be right back where they started, and they couldn't keep this up forever. They were only human, and the zombies were powered by something other than life; only pure hatred from what it seemed. Sooner or later, some kind of decision would have to be made.

Ken gave up his sprint and trotted his way back to the east side,

realizing by the sounds emanating from around the igloo that everyone and every thing would work its way around to him regardless. He made sure his shotgun was fully reloaded and prepared for what was to emerge from the corner.

Chris appeared, followed by Bill. They made their way to Ken and took up shelter from behind him. Next was Justin, his strides fluid and powerful like that of an Olympic sprinter. He reloaded as he ran. Then, two zombies with flailing limbs came into view, and a horde of critters far behind them. The humanoids stumbled upon the fallen weapons they once carried before they turned. For a mere instant, they paused their chase for Justin, the move barely noticed by the riled up humans. They momentarily studied the firearms on the ground with seemingly thoughtful looks, and then they bent down and picked them up.

"Holy shit." Ken mumbled to himself.

Justin deftly retrieved the grenade from his pocket as he ran. With a series of swift motions, he pulled the pin and lobbed it over his shoulder, never looking back. "Keep going!"

The others turned and ran.

There was a loud WHAP!

A concussion wave of heat and pressure enveloped them all, shoving them forward and to the dirt. An instant later, chunks of necrotic tissue and boiling puss rained down and pelted them.

No one was hurt as they came to, and the shock from the blast soon wore off, but Justin looked up just in time to see that the slower critters were now passing up the shallow depression the grenade left, unaffected by the blast and gaining on them.

"Keep moving!" Justin shouted. He dragged Chris upright by the collar and gave him a swift boot in the ass. "Move!"

Justin fired as he backpedaled, doing nothing but peppering the air in front. The critters had just overtaken the impact site, so they were too far away for buckshot to have any effect. Maybe one or two of them exploded into fleshy tendrils. "Shit!" Justin said. "I'm out!"

"Me too!" Ken replied.

Bill began to pray, "Father who thou art in heavenâ€¦!"

"Shut up with that!" Justin ordered. "Think!"

"We are faster than them." Ken declared with just an inkling of breath. He collected himself a few heartbeats later. "If we split up, we can get to the ATVs."

"Alright, you heard him." Justin said. "Split up!"

Everyone stole their own vectors, which momentarily confused the conglomerate of parasites skittering across the clay plain. But they soon adapted, split off into groups of two or three to pursue each man. At this point, Justin had about enough of fear and bolted

straight to a vehicle. After a five-second dash, the creatures lost interest in him, too far.

They turned around and now joined a twosome of their kin that were fixated on Bill—the least capable of maintaining a high-speed sprint. "Shit." Justin murmured.

Three parasites slowly stalked Ken, inching ever forward. A strange maneuver at first, they spread out, spanning an interval of roughly two human strides.

"God damn, these bastards are smart as hell!" Ken shouted.

"If your enemy can make tactics, you have to be smarter!" Justin shouted across the way as he mounted a Mongoose.

Ken dashed out towards the middle creature, then instantly reared back. This stunned it for not even a hundred milliseconds, the blink of an eye. It also drew one of the others closer in to make up for lost ground. This left a hole open to Ken's far right. He acted instantly and stole it. Ken juked his whole body to the right, barely missing a tentacle swipe to the calf muscle as he sped on by. He was safe and made his way to the pool of ATVs.

This left Bill and Chris, who now faced nearly a dozen in total. The two reeled in close to one another as the numerous tentacles tickled the ground, inching closer.

"God is with us." Bill said softly.

"I know." Chris replied.

A pair of Mongooses zoomed forth, headlights blazing the way. The carpet of parasites was trampled in a bursting death by churning tires. Each one of the creatures exploded alongside one another, casting vile liquid all over the ATVs' treads. Justin and Ken skidded to a halt beside Bill and Chris.

"Get on!" Justin shouted.

Chris instantly complied, grabbed pillion behind Justin while Bill mounted the back of Ken's vehicle. Justin led the way full throttle and they each sped back a short distance to the igloo, halting just outside the outer door with unrehearsed panic stops.

"Bill and Chris, grab that 'Goose."

There was one last ATV left behind by Paulie and his men. Bill took to the handlebars of the already-idling quadbike and switched the headlight on as Chris rushed to the bootpad. The boy suddenly looked over his shoulder to where Paulie's corpse lied mangled and beaten in the small depression his massive frame left in the hard clay. "That's what you get for touching a boy, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Justin smiled. Something then robbed his moment of revelry through the corner of his eye. Another wave of crawling parasites burst out of the igloo's atrium and scurried straight for them the instant the light of day bathed their slimy forms. "Move!"

The three Mongooses took off from Justin's home at full speed ahead,

zooming straight into a Northern sunset.

* * *

><p>They could make it into the refuge of the city. That much was certain. Lucky for them because it was never a good thing to be caught out in the middle of the night. And now, the parasites were loosed. And being as animalistic and savage as was seen, they probably had their scent trail. None of them thought it out of the question for the little bastards to follow them all through the night as they sped across the dimming plains.<p>

The ground had lost all its color, the sun quickly fading. Unlike the morning earlier, the clouds were low-flying all the way to the horizon; the sun was still imprisoned, which meant it might as well have been dark. What little light there was did nothing to guide them. But Justin found the one, true rut in the clay that ran all the way to the Admin courtyard. He positioned the Mongoose's wide track directly over it, the knobby tires straddling it as they all glided top speed in tandem. The headlight filled its shallow depression, with the first and last quartiles of its reassuring glow permeating wider outward. And they each had three vehicles between them, a small fortune in their favor.

Even as they rode to safety and rest ahead, the parasites' "seemingly in never-ending supply" had escaped the confines of Justin's igloo.

* * *

><p>The three ATVs slowed. Justin, riding at point came to a stop. The other drivers "Bill and Ken" pulled up alongside at the ominous fork in the road and idled for a moment.<p>

Justin asked, "How is your fuel?"

Bill peered into the gauge. "I'm at a half a tank."

"Same here." Ken echoed.

"Alright," Justin directed, "We're gonna go into the city and stock up on as much fuel as we can. Get extra canisters too. I don't care what you have to do to get them. If you want to survive, get all the fuel you can possibly carry."

"Thank the Lord we'll no longer ski." Bill quipped.

"Are we going to Solomon's?" Ken asked.

"Maybe. Not yet. We're gonna try and beat these fuckers back and retake the igloo before we give up."

"_Okay_ " Ken agreed warily. "Should we try to get more weapons?"

"Two shotguns can handle the little ones. Did you see the way they pop when they're hit?"

"Yeah."

"So then we only need shells. Lots of them. And I know where to get some."

"So run the whole plan by me." Ken said.

Justin took a deep breath. "Okay, we're gonna go in there, get as much fuel as we can carry, go to the stockyard and steal some shells, and then ride back in the morning and clean house. We'll spend the night here. Any questions?"

"I have one." Chris said.

"What the hell is it?" Justin asked.

"Can I come with you?"

Before Justin could answer, the sky lit up above them. It was as if a new sun suddenly turned on and began fusion after a billion years of collecting gas, only this sun was inside Traxus IX's atmosphere.

"Atom bomb!" Ken shouted.

Justin slapped him on the back of the neck and pointed to the sky. "It's not an atom bomb, stupid. Look."

Something plummeted fast to the surface. Even from the ground, Bill could see it part layers of clouds high above them. "It's a comet or something. It's falling pretty fast."

"â€|It's falling this way!" Justin screamed. "Move!"

The sky grew brighter and brighter, hotter and hotter as each rider gunned the throttle and took their own vector away from the soon-to-be impact site. And they barely cleared it. The massive, flaming projectile cleared the last layer of cloud with the speed of a lightning bolt. The ground all around shook as it smashed straight into the mine entrance just beyond the road, the draft in its wake sucking a few squalls of chemical vapor downwards. Plumes of white-hot metal shards and crimson-colored liquid rock jettisoned outward from the collision like a Fire Lily in bloom. A few molten pebbles pelted everyoneâ€|Graveball fields away from the crater by now.

In the midst of all the dust and falling debris at the crash site, the flames were slowly smothered and the air cooled again. A moment later and the dust and smoke cleared fully. And jutting out from the immediate proximity of the small crater was the tail end of a vessel, its bottom side charred from the ride through the atmosphere. Justin grabbed a hold of Ken's attention across the plain with frantic waving. He waved back. Then together, they both attained Bill and Chris' attention from far away. As if spurred by telepathy, they each crept their Mongooses towards the vessel at a gentle roll.

Upon a stone's throw away from the craft, their headlamps lit it up to reveal that indeed it was an aerospace vehicle with strange markings on its bleach-white composite skin. Clearly, it wasn't designed for atmospheric flight. It had stubby wings spanning from a thick fuselage. And the thrusters were clearly some kind of liquid fuel rocket/ramjet hybrid. The entire dorsal surface was the cabin,

bulbous and levelâ€”making the ship look more like a sleek, smooth torpedo fashioned out of pure porcelain.

Justin hopped off and slowly made his way to the vesselâ€”heat still wavering off it. "I thought this place was done with surprises."

He reached a gloved hand out to the ship, but the entire hull was heat-soaked. He withdrew it instantly. Even if there was someone inside, the cabin was raised too high off the ground for Justin to open it. But the dorsal hatch popped open anyways, much to his surprise. He backpedaled a few steps as wisps of vapor curled out of the canopy, sinking downwards to the belly of the hull and the charred turf. Justin could feel the cold from it. The cool air descending mixed with the hot air rising, and a misty cloud of condensing vapor was what resulted over the ground.

A shadowy figure emerged from behind the mist, clearly disoriented as it found balance with an outstretched limb over the canopy rail. Justin could make out the twinkling of different colored lights from the inside, casting eerie shadows all around. The occupant swung a leg over the side and rappelled them self down by an internally-mounted cable, soon reaching the last few inches and jumping to the ground with a thud and a grunt. A deep, throaty grunt. Justin could tell it was a man who piloted the vehicle.

This man brushed some sort of debris off him and turned around to face Justin. "Thank God. Where am I?"

"Traxus Nine."

Justin sensed he was unharmed. The man was coherent and lucidâ€”incredible from the fact that he just survived an impact like that. "How are you still alive after that crash? And what's that shit all over you?"

"Restraining foam, I think. Cabin fills up with it during a crash-landing. I never heard of this city. What's it called again?"

"Traxus Nine. It's a planet, not a city."

"_Okay_â€”what day is it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know what day it is?"

"I haven't known what day it was for ten years."

"How do you live your life, man?"

"I have no life."

"Well, tell me how far I am from Earth."

Justin laughed. "You were headed to Earth?"

The man clenched his jaw. "Yeah."

"You're a long ways away from it, there, Misterâ€”"

"Hendricksson. Joseph A. Hendricksson. Commander of Alliance Forces, planet Sirius Six-B."

"Yeah, I don't know what all that is, but you just crash-landed on one of the outer colonies, bud. If I was to guess, and I'm a pretty good guesser, I'd say you are about twenty light-years from Earth."

Hendricksson slumped. "You're kidding."

Justin shook his head with an ill-mannered smirk. "You must've missed that left turn at Albuquerque."

"Fucking God damn it!" he shouted, kicking his ship's hull one good time.

Justin smiled, perhaps more coldly than empathetic. "Wellâ€|at least you're _down _to Earth. Welcome to Traxus Nine."

21. Cat and Mouse

**Cat and Mouse**

Hendricksson looked around at his surroundings and instantly threw up his arms in frustration, letting them fall limply to his sides. "Do you have any repair facilities?"

Justin eyed the man quizzically, then looked behind him to Bill, Ken and Chris. He smiled uncontrollably.

"â€|Well?" Hendricksson beckoned.

"You just crash-landed on...well...you crash-landed on a prison colony of sorts. You can't leave, Joe, you're stuck here, Joe."

"Bullshit. Take me to the warden or whoever is in charge so I can get this thing repaired and get the Hell out of here."

"There's no warden. There's no guards. Hell, there isn't even any TV."

"What kind of a prison colony is this?"

"It's Traxus Nine."

* * *

><p>Nighttime fully reigned over the plains. All was dark about the entrance to the mine and even the crashed ship was slipping out of view, but everyone's eyes had fully adjusted during the last five or so minutes as they sat near the charred and damaged spacecraft. Justin laid out the entire history of Traxus IX for Joe. The others watched as Justin spoke, the work of a master storyteller on display. Hendricksson never blinked, crossed between shock and anger the longer the story went on until Justin finished.<p>

"â€|And that's why you're stuck here."

"Fuck me running, so I'm here for good. Well, anything is better than where I just came from."

"Where's that again?" Chris asked.

"Sirius Six-B. I'm the only survivor. At least, I'm pretty sure of that. But there's no going back, obviously." Joe let out a desolate chuckle, and then he stared on. "I thought I was on my way back home."

"How did you veer so far off course?" Ken asked.

"Hell if I know. Maybe it was a NAV computer malfunction; figures it would be my luck. I was going to raise hell about what Alliance Command did to us out there, and I was also going to speak out on what's about to happen on Triton Four."

Justin shook his head. "What is all this you're talking about? I've never heard of any of these places."

"Haven't you been paying attention to galactic events? I know you're stuck here and all, but you had to have cared once."

"Assuming these places existed, why would I even care about them in the first place?"

"Because war affects everything, and Sirius Six-B did exist, and there was fighting there, no matter what the mass media tells you. And now the NEB has Triton Four in its sights, andâ€"

"â€"First of all," Justin interrupted, "What is the NEB and are they allied with the Covenant or Innies?"

Joe tilted his head. "â€|Who's the Covenant?"

All he was answered with was blank, disbelieving stares.

* * *

><p>"Okayâ€|" Joe said as Justin finished explaining things again.<p>

They all waited for him to say something.

"...I'm inclined to ask just where exactly in God's Milky Way I am."

"Hell, I don't know exactly where we are." Justin barked. "I can't spit out any constellations for you, but I do know that we're roughly halfway between Reach and what was once Harvest."

"See, there you go again with the planets I've never heard of."

"And we've never heard any of the colonies you speak of as well." Justin retorted. Everyone else nodded in accordance, backing Justin up firmly. "Something is not adding up here."

Joe leaned back casually against the hull of his ship, sufficiently cooled off by this point. "I'm clueless." he said.

Justin stood up and pondered possibilities. "Who was President when you left Sirius Six-B?"

"Normand Weller."

"Never heard of him, and last time I checked it was Russell who was in office...and that was well more than ten years ago."

"No, that can't be."

"Yes." Justin affirmed, "Paul Murphy Russell, promoted to President of the UEG after serving as Secretary of Defense. How far is Sirius Six-B from Earth?"

"Eight and a half light-years, I think."

"I would definitely know of it then, and I don't." Justin tapped a knuckle against the hull of Hendricksson's vessel. "How long were you drifting in this thing?"

"I...don't know."

Justin snapped his finger. "What year was it when you left Sirius Six-B?"

"Twenty seventy-eight."

"â€|Wow."

* * *

><p>After Justin told Hendricksson how long he'd been drifting, the commander wept where he sat. It was silent sobbing at first, which gradually cascaded into flowing tears. It was disheartening for Bill and Chris to watch a grown man cry. Ken even pitied the man but he was far too inept to show emotion, however much of it he felt.<p>

"Give 'em some room." Justin ordered the group.

Each of them left Joe to himself.

Justin took a leaning stance up against his Mongoose and tried to tune out Hendricksson's crying. A moment later, realizing he couldn't, he knelt down and began working on his ATV to take his mind off the deplorable sounds. He grabbed a screwdriver from a utility pouch under the seat and began loosening certain fasteners on one of the farings. He placed the removed screws in his pocket and popped off a small plastic cover, then reached inside and grabbed a conical object lined with a fine, metallic meshâ€"the vehicle's air filter. He tapped it against the sole of his boot and a cloud of dust billowed outwards from it, barely in competition with the air around him. Other smaller debris fell to the ground after another hard wallop against his boot. He replaced the filter and all the other assemblage with a look of satisfaction, only to feel annoyance's return upon Hendricksson's sobbing arriving back into his consciousness.

Another moment went by with nothing for anyone to do but watch this

sad man go on like he was. Eventually, he wiped away the tears and looked around. The inhospitable world of Traxus IX greeted him straightforwardly. He was not special. He was only unlucky.

Justin glanced around the crash site rather emphatically. Normally, to remain stagnant like this was foolhardy and Traxus IX had a way of exacting punishment to such actions, to people feeling sorry for themselves; Justin knew this, had seen such tragedies play out many times before.

"C'mon, Joe," Justin said "you can't stay here. You came at a bad time. It's very dangerous to be out here. You need to come with us indoors."

With that, Hendricksson found the will to push himself up off the dirt-smothered clay and mount an ATV behind Justin.

Together, the Mongoose trio headed a short distance into City 17.

* * *

><p>After clearing the dark tunnel entrance to the inner sanctum, they each slowed to a stop and waited for the wide bay doors to heave themselves open.<p>

"The air is terrible out here." Hendricksson stated, wincing as he craned his head high out of his thick-necked jacket.

"It's not the air," Justin said, "it's what's in it."

"What, pollution?"

"That's right. Toxins and carcinogens everywhere. So, if you're a smoker, light 'em if you got 'em; because you're still gonna get some form of cancer from this place before you die of old age, or worse."

The bay doors finally opened enough for all of them to walk through, shoulder to shoulder. Light flooded them, as well as a generous amount of dust and fumes. And despite having generous ventilation stretching from the underground mines all the way to the top of the bay they now occupied, there was just too much pollutant. It was just about manageable for them to carry on. But they hadn't yet proceeded inwards.

Hendricksson regarded the interior with a kind of reluctant acceptance, taking acute notice in the mass of industrial fallout crowded near the ceiling, watching its journey before the volatile cloud inevitably rose skyward. Cylindrical scrubbers mounted to the pitched trusses high above were nothing more than chemical catalysts spewing out fine, atomized mists of alkaline reagents. The process of decontamination was nothing more than combining volatile elements with other volatile elements. Under optimal conditions and regular maintenance from a qualified technician, the scrubbers could achieve an efficiency of 80% particulate removal. The remainder would have to be contained and processed for other uses. But everyone knew the aging and neglected devices weren't operating at 80%, not for many years. Whatever they did remove, they certainly weren't taking advantage of those leftover materials that could be recycled for other things. Instead, the resultant waste was likely dumped

somewhere outside the factory where a forgotten spigot lied. Just another part of the job, another detail overlooked by the workers living there. On most other worlds, waste that was dumped in such an ignorant manner would inevitably reach the water table—bad news for all. An environmental health inspector would have a field day at any factory they stepped foot in, if in fact they ever gained access. The only feasible way would be to visit T-09, which unknowingly meant permanent residence.

The whole factory was a being in and of itself. It was a machine, alive and breathing, taking in what the workers offered and belching out leftovers. He steadily eyed the scene with wonder and revulsion.

"That's what poisoned it?" Joe asked.

"That, commander Hendricksson, used to be the most profitable, sophisticated and wonderful enterprise in the galaxy. Everything in front of you got the UNSC all the way to the farthest reaches and back. We produced cargo containers, the great answer to the expansion question of the human race." Justin lit up a cigarette and stared blankly ahead. "Just one of these factories can spit out a thousand containers in a day. And we made it happen. Then the criminals and dealers and black marketeers arrived, destroying everything. And by pure dumb luck and God-forsaken coincidence, the mines and the factories started puking up this—cubic tons of it. We thought we discovered gold. We discovered shit."

Justin strode into the bay.

Everyone followed on his lead.

"So how do you know you're safe from all the pollution?" Joe asked.

Justin looked over his shoulder, "Because you ain't dead yet."

They made their way to one of the break rooms. Justin made sure no one else was inside. He led Hendricksson to a chair. "Have a seat. Are you hungry?"

Hendricksson nodded meekly.

"Alright." Justin looked around. He was satisfied that no one could see in, the window pane only permitting a one-way view from the inside out. "Ken, why don't you get this man something from the chow hall."

"Sure." he said, walking off.

Chris wheeled around towards Ken—exiting the break room. "Can I come with you?"

Ken stopped short of the door and looked disapprovingly to Justin.

Justin shrugged and said, "Don't slow him down, Kid."

Ken reluctantly waited for Chris, knowing perfectly well that he was young and vulnerable, even indoors. He stepped out, closing the door

behind him.

That left Justin, Bill and Joe inside the break room. Justin grabbed Bill by the arm and led him to the corner of the room, just out of whisper range of Hendricksson—who was mending in his own world right now.

Justin whispered, "Do what you do, Bill. Try to keep him calm and cozy and all that stuff. I'm going to the stockyard for our supplies."

"And what will we do about him?"

"What do you mean?"

"We can't just leave him here."

"This guy is some sort of soldier, Bill. A commander, for crying out loud. I'm sure he can last a while inside a break room. Besides, we'll be back soon enough once we're done with the critters. Hell, if you want, stay with him. Show him around his new home and get him acquainted."

"And even after all that, what then?"

"Bill, I don't know if I can manage another—"

"Pete is gone. Hendricksson can take up his place, no harm and no foul."

"Maybe."

"Please consider it."

"Yeah, when I'm not blasting away zombie-producing spiders, I will."

Bill chuckled and nodded, placing a brief hand on Justin's shoulder before he left for the stockyard.

* * *

><p>Joe Hendricksson gradually awoke from his sorrowful musing. His eyes were fully dried and he could see clearer. His hopes of reaching Earth were gone. He knew that now, yet nothing about his escape journey from Sirius 6B made any sense. The Alliance made it so every Commander's escape pod had all human-controlled space mapped. All you had to do was state your destination and the onboard NAV computer would do all the work for you. Eight and a half light-years was a puddle jump. How did he drift for so far and so long?<p>

"So he said we're twenty light-years from Earth, right?" Joe asked.

Joe's voice briefly startled Bill—who so used to the quiet of the break room for this amount of time now. Workers and foremen bustled around the factory floor like worker bees, sorting out scraps, calibrating various electro-mechanical devices, supervising each other's safety, and doing whatever else that made this place run. It was like a colony, all inhabitants working together for basic survival needs.

They had no superficial functions. They had no personal agendas. They cared not for money or status or possessions. They were as divine as could be despite their hostile environment. Sheep among wolves.

"Yes," Bill said, staring blankly out the window, "twenty light-years."

"Please," Joe begged with closed eyes, "tell me what year it is."

"I don't know exactly since I've been here so long, but I believe it is close to twenty-five fifty."

"Jesus."

"Pleaseâ€|do not take the Lord's name in vain."

"Right." Joe suddenly noticed the unmistakable band of white cloth across Bill's neck. "Sorry, Father."

"It is okay. Tell me, what made it possible to drift for that long?"

"The ship had a life support system. It must've sent me into hibernation when the NAV computer shit the bed."

"But that is nearly five-hundred years you lingered. I don't believe any cryo-stasis technology has even come close to achieving that kind of benchmark. How do you suppose you survived?"

"Hell, I don't know. Heart rate and breathing slows down, brain is hardly used. Beats me."

"Well, whatever it was that kept you alive, surely God had a part in it, Joe. Be thankful you are with us."

"I'm not saying I'm not thankful. I very much am."

"I know it is hard to accept that you'll never see home again."

"So excuse me if I seem a little detached."

Bill chuckled. "Do not be ashamed. When you see more of this world and the people in it, you will see just how detached people can become."

Joe joined Bill in his laughter. "So is there a place to grab some food?"

"Didn't you hear earlier? Chris and Ken are already getting some for you."

* * *

><p>Justin waited once again for the factory bay doors to split apart. After a few agonizing seconds, they finally did and night's presence revealed itself, sucking in all the light the factory offered. The air was cold and a little crisp, but still heavy with particulate. Justin walked straight into it. There was no need to take the Mongoose for the short distance over to the Eastern front

where the stockyards wereâ€”just through the next tunnel and under the massive lookout tower looming above it. He needed to stretch his legs anyway. And it felt good to be alone for a change, one with his own thoughts.<p>

Yet the more he tried to just be at peace with his surroundings, the more his mind wandered to his current predicament. At the forefront of his discontent was the creatures that now laid claim over his home, and it was very likely they were on the way to the factory with no hosts to devour back at the igloo; surely they had his scent trail and yearned for his body. Justin wondered how fast the little bastards were, and if they could skitter all the way to the city without tiring. Coming in at a close second in Justin's growing list of misfortunes was the fact that Kaiser Sergei wanted his services. Failing that, he wanted his head on a pike. Compounding that dilemma was the fact that Paulie and five of his men were surely to be expected back by now. It wouldn't be long until the Kaiser dispatched more men to hunt Justin down.

And while things couldn't have gotten any stranger in such a short span of time, a man from another time had crash-landed on Traxus IXâ€”this left yet another person to look after besides Chris.

And binding all this strife together in one horrendous knot was the voice ebbing in and out of his mind. It was still there, ever present, subsided for the time being. But he could still hear a gentle throbbing, a violent voice so attenuated that it might as well have been snoring in a deep sleepâ€”that's how real it seemed. It already claimed Pete, who Justin had to put down himself.

Even though Justin took his time strolling to the stockyard, it felt as though he was in a race against time. Sooner or later, he'd hit a snag with this amount of turmoil. One of these problems would cross his path or maybe, all of them at once. The point that he now just realized, was the fact that he should be worried. He couldn't afford to be his usual self much longer, cocky and slack. Everything had changed rather dramatically in such a short time. He had to get into the stockyard and get what he needed, fast. He raised his pace to a light jog, his footfalls echoing off the mighty perimeter walls of the courtyard.

He arrived at the tunnel entrance in half the time it would've taken him at a walk. He proceeded through the void, nothing to guide his way except memory alone. He reached the midpoint as the tunnel began its upward journey again, a faint light at the end. He made for it.

The light was there not as a as a courtesy, but rather as a deterrent. It faced away from the pitch-black tunnel and into the barren plains. Any sentries stationed atop the perimeter wall aboveâ€”and there rarely ever wereâ€”they would be able to clearly make out any sort of trouble approaching from the surrounding area. This lack of light on Justin's side made it somewhat hard to get a good view inside the chain-linked area where all the goodies were kept. He slipped inside without a sound. If there were any guards tonight, they would literally be one story above his head. And there was never any knowing which guards worked which shiftsâ€”he couldn't take any chances. He had to keep silent while he looted, a double-edged sword considering he was on borrowed time.

He risked flipping on one light. Its illumination was well contained inside one of the storage sectors, barely any of it seeping out into the plainâ€”perfect.

He conjured up a memory, when a business contact of his told him the combination to storage yard B. Hopefully, the combination hadn't changed since then. He lifted the padlock as far as he could and gave the dial five twists to the right to clear it out. Then, he began finding what he hopefully thought were the correct numbers in the meager light.

Justin heard a noise. It was some sort of rustling, metal on metal, something brushing against chain-link. Justin hit the deck. In his momentary favor, the noise was a good deal away from him, on the other side of the stockyard.

A moment later and the origin of the noise changed, getting closer and closer. Justin didn't move a muscle. In perfect silence, he opened up the right side of his thick coat and withdrew his shotgun, ready for whatever.

He could hear a voice, and it wasn't the one trapped inside his head.

* * *

><p>Ken and Chris entered the chow hall. It was a short walk away from the factory floor and through a long, narrow corridor. The yawning hallway had only two doors at either end and was probably the most well-lit sector of the entire complex. It was this way so that workers may check themselves for any contaminant or just dirt accumulating on themselves and their factory-furnished coveralls. Lining one wall were sinks at regular intervals, stretching from entrance to exit. A variety of sanitization dispensers hung above them. But Ken and Chris had little time for clean up. If Bill were among them, he'd say something like, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." And of course, nobody would pay it much attention, especially now.<p>

They neared the end of the corridor. "Just get basic snacks and stuff, and carry as much as you can." Ken told Chris. "There's no time for entrees and the good stuff." Ken shoved open the chow hall door. It was surprisingly empty. Usually, there'd be at least a handful of people grabbing a quick snack in the middle of their shift, maybe taking it with them to a break room. But it was totally barren. All chairs were atop the rows and rows of tables. Even the volunteer janitors for the week had swept and wiped the place cleanâ€”strange.

"There's no one here." Chris said.

"Yeahâ€”|" Ken said absentmindedly. "Whatever. Get to work."

They each rushed over to circular conveyors laden with pre-packaged snacks and various sealed drink containers. Chris retrieved a basket nearby and shoved it full of fruits and vegetables. Ken looked over at him and frowned. "What? We need real food, too." Chris said.

Once satisfied of their stock, they hefted their food and went back the way they came.

* * *

><p>Bill took a seat next to Joe inside the break room. He reached into a pocket near his chest and retrieved a silver flask, shining brightly like a signal flare in the overhead fluorescence. He popped open the top and took a generous swig.<p>

"A little late in the day for that?" Joe asked.

Bill swallowed the liquor, then peered down at the flask in his hand thoughtfully. "Indeed, it is." He stowed it back in his pocket.

"So how long have you known Justin?"

"Ever since I arrived on Traxus Nine."

"He's quite the tenacious leader, isn't he?"

"He has his ways about him. You'll consider it a blessing if you ever see his generous side. Doesn't suffer fools gladly, either."

Joe glanced out the window. "It seems you've all grown pretty comfortable in this lifestyle."

"Yes, but that is the only choice for us in this world. Justin has told you enough of its history, so surely you must understand that you either do what is necessary or you perish. Sometimes, you must forego your own conscience to survive in such a world."

"But in your spare time you're a priest. Seems like quite the odd job here."

Bill contemplated his response. "There is still good yet to be had."

"So what landed you here?" Joe leaned back.

"I was a chaplain in the UNSC. I was embedded in the Three Seventy-Sixth Combat Brigade out of Jericho Seven. The Covenant showed up one day. It all happened so fast, and we weren't ready. Bits and pieces of the Three Seventy-Sixth were tasked out here and there as other units became scattered and defeated. I wasn't sure where to place myself; I had grown so attached to every one of the troops. I loved them all like family. And before I could depart a troop transport to a forward area, the brass gave the order to evacuate the whole planet. I was among the last to board the troop carriers. Ours docked with a cruiser on the far side, right as they glassed. God had a purpose for me that day. The irony of our defense didn't hit me until I could see the planet from an outside perspective, because only a few Covenant capital ships arrived for their ritual cleansing. Just a few enemy ships against eleven UNSC. We couldn't even put up a fight on the ground, much less stand up to that kind of might in orbit.

"A few years and several assignments later and the UNSC was asking for a volunteer from the faith community to accompany a small group of Marines headed on a humanitarian mission to Traxus Nine. It was a cake walk compared to everything else going on in the galaxy. I had seen so much over the years, so I readily accepted, just as those

Marines did; most of them were combat-fatigued and on their last nerve to begin with. Their mission was simple, just to make sure colonization ran smoothly and to bolster mil-to-civ relations hereâ€|

"Well, of course nothing ever goes perfectly. The unit went out to one of the towns on a 'peace-keeping' mission. The mayor of City 17 had requested the Marines take a look into this gangster by the name of Kaiser Sergei, one of the first drug lords to settle here. He was nothing more than a petty dealer back then, but the commander of this small squad decided it would be in everyone's best interest to help the mayor and take a look into the Kaiser's affairs. So they set out and quickly established a rapport with the townspeople, who eventually clued them in to where the Kaiser had taken up residenceâ€"in a brothel on the bad side of town. They conducted surveillance operations for a few weeks and they learned much of his dealings. They accumulated enough evidence for the civil magistrate to put him away for good and it was then that they decided to take him into custody, the day it happenedâ€|

"A young Captain entered the brothel with his squad, fully armed, thinking he had the element of surprise. But word travels fast in a town when you enter it in a convoy of military-grade Warthogs. The Kaiser was already at the door, with a young kid taken hostage. He was holding him at gunpoint."

Joe sat straighter. "What did the Captain do?"

"He awaited orders from the commanding officer, our Major at the field HQ in City Seventeen."

"What was the order?"

"The order was to do whatever it took to bring Sergei down, dead or alive. After some hesitation from the Captain, a more specific order was given."

"The Captain shot the kid?"

"Yes, killed him and wounded Sergei. A gunfight broke out instantly between the Marines and the Kaiser's men. The Marines had superior weaponry and armor, but that is no match for terrain advantage, as every Marine always tells me. The brothel was a three-story building, and the Marines were being fired upon from an elevated position. They had no cover. They were quickly slaughtered except one Marine who managed to escape. And when the Captain made it back to City Seventeen, he nearly killed the Major. It took me and three other men to keep him from doing so."

"So, what then?"

"The Major knew that the Captain would speak out over what occurred, so he fled Traxus Nine aboard their only transport. It was hours later that the marooned Captain found he'd been declared AWOL and wanted as a fugitive."

"The commander turned on him?"

"Yes. And coincidentally, all the tragic events of Traxus Nine began to take place. This is where we are now."

"Holy shit. What ever became of the Captain?"

"He still leads us."

* * *

><p>Justin heard two pairs of feet shuffling over the clay. The voice he heard earlier got steadily louder, just as another voice sounded off and added to the approaching conversation. Two menâ€"as far as Justin could gatherâ€"were bearing down on his position. He was not in the ideal place, like many other times in his life. He began to slither on his stomach, for they'd inevitably work their way around to him. He didn't recognize either of their voices. They could be anyone. And no one could be trusted on Traxus IX.<p>

Once an amicable distance from their sights, Justin rose to one knee and hunkered down behind a corner postâ€"taking up the classic covering position. Rounding a corner at the end of his aisle were two men, too dark to see their faces. But it was quite evident that one of them carried a firearm at his side. They stopped right where Justin originally was and inspected the cage full of supplies in what little light there was.

"Everything is locked down tighter than a drum." one of them said.
"Where the hell is Paulie?"

"Should've been here by now." the other said.

"Maybe he's still meeting with his contact."

"We can't wait anymore. The Kaiser said to assume the worst, so let's get to work."

The other man pulled from his thick coat a pair of bolt cutters. Justin watched in silence as the man slid the mouth of them over the U-shaped joint of the padlock and pressed the handles together with all his might. Nothing much happened except for him scoring the hardened material. It was heat-treated and shot-peened metal, a little too stout for their hardware. He tried again, exerted maximum strength, grunted, exhaled, let go. He frowned. They'd need a hydraulic press in order to snap that thing. Justin reduced himself from a kneeling position to an uncomfortable seat in the clay. He was content to let these men go on in frustration until they gave up and left.

"God damn, they don't fuck around here." one of them said.

"Let me try." the other said, pulling a hacksaw from his jacket.

Justin boggled in his dirt seat. A hacksaw was a different story. It would take them a while, but they would eventually cut through. If there were guards posted tonight, the racket of sawing metal would surely alert them. They'd arrive downstairs in seconds. It would ruin his plan. He wouldn't be able to acquire the shotgun shells he needed, and therefore wouldn't be able to get his home back from the parasitic creatures. Justin would not let minions of the Kaiser steal what was his. He reached down and picked up a dense, fist-sized chunk of clay and threw it far to the left.

It loudly pinged off a section of chain-link, and instantly the two thugs wheeled in that direction. One's shotgun was raised and the other's bolt cutters were too. The one holding the bolt cutters whispered, "Go check that out."

"I outrank you. You go check it out."

"You're the one with the gun!"

"Then take the gun and find whoever is in here. I'm getting our shit outta here."

"Don't you think we should look together?"

"Get moving!"

The other reluctantly set off into the unknown darkness of the stockyard, slow and cautious steps, his shotgun pointed ahead of him. He disappeared behind a squall of shadow and soon faded from sound.

Justin moved.

* * *

><p>Ken and Chris returned to the factory floor. Ahead of them was the usual scene: conveyors, ventilation hoods, sparks and dust everywhere. Business as usual. The workers were occupied in their duties, paying no mind to Ken and Chris who were laden with baskets of food and drink. They slipped into the break room.<p>

"Jackpot." Bill said as they entered.

Ken closed the door gingerly. "Take your pick, Joe."

Hendricksson left his chair and walked over to where Ken and Chris set down the food on a nearby table. He selected what he wanted and situated himself in a seat once again. He ate feverishly, as if emerging from hibernation—he literally had. Everyone watched him, rather taken back by it. But they could understand.

Hendricksson looked up at them. "What?"

"Nothing." Ken said. "I've been around soldiers before but I've never seen anyone eat that fast. I'm truly impressed."

Joe laughed and resumed eating.

Chris suddenly pointed out the window and tugged at Ken's jacket.

"What?" Ken asked, backing away from the boy.

"Something is wrong. Do you see that man out there, the older one with the patch on his eye?"

"Yeah."

"He's one of the Kaiser's men. He tried to attack me when I first got

hereâ€|with Paulie."

"Well, this is no coincidence." Ken instinctively ducked, then stood upright again. The window of the break room was one-way.

"Do you think he saw us while we were out there?"

"I don't know, but let's wait until he leaves."

* * *

><p>Justin crept his way closer to the man at the cage furiously sawing away at the padlock. In this diminutive amount of light, Justin could make out glistening sweat beads trickling over his brow. Sweating in this cold, the man was surely out of shape. Justin would let him go a little longer, figuring that the other one prowling the greater stockyard with the shotgun would be occupied for a whileâ€"long enough for Justin to figure out what to do. And the one with the hack would only tire more the longer he went on and on.<p>

Justin waited another moment, then decided to make his move while the opportunity was good. The other one with the gun was a good deal away by now; Justin could make out a fraction of his silhouette about half a klick away. This was as opportune as it would ever get; things always got complicated the more people were involved. Justin could easily handle one, unarmed man.

He sprang from shadow.

"How about I try it?" Justin said, stepping into full view.

"...The fuck?" the man said.

Just as the muted light half-struck Justin's face, the man with the hacksaw took up a fighting stance. But Justin brandished his shotgun, and the man's disposition instantly morphed into a more submissive appearance, knowing he was beaten. Of course, Justin's shotgun was empty, but Kaiser's thug didn't know that. And Justin's poker face was like billet steel.

Justin approached him and pressed the business end of the shotgun against the side of his neck. "Step aside." Justin ordered.

The man slowly complied, more sweat dripping down his face than before.

Justin glanced down to the lock and assessed the man's progress: it was almost sawed completely through. Justin couldn't open it the correct way even if he thought he could; he wasn't accomplished enough as a multitasker to hold a man hostage and simultaneously undo a lock. Surely the thug would try something then. So, Justin stepped behind the man, shotgun ever against him, and said, "Please, continue what you were doing."

He frowned and stepped forward, placing the hacksaw back onto the weakened lock. Justin looked around and kept a watchful eye on the periphery, waiting for the other's return.

Apparently, the other already had returned. Justin heard a rustle

nearby.

"I can hear you breathing." Justin softly shouted. "Just come out. There's no use playing hide and seek any longer. But I tell you what...we can play a new game now. We'll call it 'who can keep their cool the longest'."

The man with the shotgun emerged from cover shortly thereafter, his shotgun leveled at Justin—who was now positioned directly behind the one hack sawing the lock. "What happened to Paulie?" he demanded of Justin.

"The lock is open now." the other said.

"Good, dumbass. Now open the door." Justin barked.

"You," Justin said to the other, "drop the piece or I drop him."

The man had Justin in his crosshairs and could easily hit him, but he'd also kill his friend in the process. And the sequence of events thereafter was just as simple as it was inevitable if he chose that path: he would shoot his friend, whom Justin would simply use as a human shield. The next move was Justin killing him. Knowing he was in lose-lose status, he glared once, and then complied with Justin. He slowly bent down to place the weapon on the ground.

Reid maintained his crude aim at the neck of the man next to him. "Now, if nobody loses their head, than nobody'll lose their head. Simple, now walk inside the cage. If you try _anything_..."

The thug took slow and precious steps, brushing past Justin and proceeding into the cage without incident.

"Stay there. You," Justin said to the man on the other end of his shotgun, "Get me shotgun shells. As much as you can carry."

Justin kept the shotgun trained on him while he set off into the closet-like enclosure. A moment and he appeared with his arms cradled about his chest, laden with shotgun ammunition.

"Dump it on the floor." Justin looked around. "Don't move." Justin ran to the foreman's area near the entrance and retrieved a spare lock hanging on a wall. "Take this and lock yourself in."

The man hesitated as he glared at Justin again.

"Now!"

He grabbed it from Justin's hand and abided by his terms, locking himself and his friend inside, for Justin was the one with the gun.

Justin scooped as many shells as he could and shoved them deep into his many pockets, jacket, pants, even his socks. On his way out, Justin grabbed their shotgun off the ground, and turned around.

"Oh, and Paulie is dead. But be thankful you are inside this cage. It might just be the safest place now. Nice doing business with you, gentlemen."

Justin ran out of the stockyard and through the dark tunnel. He was only slightly winded as he emerged on the other side. His next place of business was at the southern front of the city for fuelâ€”a lot of it. He would acquire as much as his Mongoose could carry.

Running at top speed, it was another short trip across the barren courtyard to the southern complex, shotgun shells jingling inside his pockets with every stride. Like the factory he usually worked in day after day on the other side of the courtyard, this structure also had wide doors that took forever to open. He waited until a slice of light the width of a human bathed him. He rushed inwards.

In this factory, a myriad of workers not unlike those inside its twin across the way, labored, with the majority of them nearly oblivious to his presence. Good thing too because it wouldn't take a behavioral scientist to realize that he was on edge about something. He stole two canisters from a nearby rack and carried them out into the courtyard. The lazy doors slid closed once again. He was in and out. He ran over to the Hydrogen spigot and enacted the usual procedure of acquiring fuel. His pace was limited to how fast the spigot could spew it out. Unfortunately as well, two containers was all he could carry. He'd have to hoof it across the courtyard and back into the factory floorâ€”where his Mongoose was parked, drive back and load up more fuel bladders. Then, the others would follow suitâ€”Bill and Ken. Having the newly-arrived Joe would also make light work of this errand. Maybe his bizarre arrival was a blessing in disguise, as Bill probably thought.

Justin finished. He grabbed the filled containers and waddled across the courtyard with the weight of them sagging his collar bone a little, relentlessly bearing down on his frame.

It took longer than he liked to reach the factory floor, especially after waiting an eternityâ€”once againâ€”for the bay doors to part open.

Before there was ample enough clearance to get inside the factory floor, Justin heard a strange and perhaps potentially devastating noise skittering across the courtyard. He panned his vision to the tunnel that led upwards into the courtyard from the outer sanctum. Emerging into the light of the yard was an incalculable amount of the parasites, edging ever closer to him as if on autopilot, as if their only function was to hunt him down and claim him.

Time seemed to slow as he hurriedly stepped inside, practically squeezing himself through the widening fissure.

Nothing had changed since he left for the stockyard. The place was still bustling with the tired and worked-to-death night shift of City 17, all operating their respective areas in the glaring overhead fluorescence.

He stepped a few paces to where his Mongoose lied, chained to the nearby busbar. He dropped the two fuel bladders next to the ATV's chassis, then quickly made his way to where the others were holed up in. Joe was probably busy eating as much as he could while the othersâ€”were probably just waiting, for all Justin knew. They relied so much on his direction.

He ascended a miniscule flight of steps to the break room door. He

opened it and rushed in.

A handful of the Kaiser's men were inside, along with Bill, Ken, Joe, and Chris—who was in the grasp of Sergei himself.

22. A Chance Partnership

A Chance Partnership****

Justin brought his shotgun to bear and instantly took aim at Sergei.

"Now," Sergei said, "I'm in a pretty position here, ain't I? Even with that gauge pointed at my face, I could demand any number of things out of you. My weapons returned to me. Your plans for routing the promised supplies toward my encampments. But I think not. I think our little game of cat and mouse ends here. You're going to take me straight to the stock yard and unlock all the treasures inside of it."

Down the length of the smooth barrel, Justin could make out the upper half of his face through the front iron sights—along with that typical glimmer in his coal-black eyes. Justin didn't answer right away, but not because he didn't know how to respond. It was because Sergei—a God among lesser men—actually seemed quite insignificant this instant. Even though the warlord had taken it upon himself to show up here and complete the deal—taking young, defenseless Chris and everyone else hostage in the process—Justin surprisingly had bigger threats to consider.

They were crawling closer by the second.

He glanced out the one-way window into the factory floor. The damned bay doors took their sweet time closing. "Son of a bitch." Justin said absentmindedly.

"Yes, that's right." Sergei mocked in reply as all other assailants began to grin. It was then that he pressed his sidearm into the small of Chris' back for emphasis. "But fretting does you no good and I don't sympathize with enemies. I want my supplies. Drop your weapon before I'm forced to take away someone close to you."

The one-eyed elderly man who Justin fought a few nights ago was also here, brandishing a pistol, pressing it into dear Bill's temple. Justin glanced out once again to the factory entrance. Squinting, he could make out the pale, flesh-colored skin of the writhing mass, crawling so gracefully that they might as well have been hovering. The creatures were upon the threshold to the bay, no intention of stopping despite the massive doors coming to a pinch. Only a handful of them would make it through before the rest got squeezed to their basic body parts. This gave Justin some measure of reassurance. He could deal with a few of the bastards if need be.

Now, all sounds inside the break room seemed drowned out as Justin focused in on the first creature to breach the bay. In fact, the voice inside his head was now totally inaudible as his very breath hung on the outcome.

The first one made it past the transition and skittered on its feeler

limbs towards the interior.

And as fate would have it, it tripped the proximity safety sensors inside the door sill and the entry way halted briefly in place before screeching open once again. They flooded through.

Only Justin had any idea on what would transpire next. He now took his eyes off the parting entrance and placed them to the assembly line where people had always labored. Not many of them ever really spoke to one another throughout the day. It was usually all business on the factory floor. But when any of the workers did speak, it was all from the heart. No one here ever had hidden agendas. They were as honest as could be, stealing only what they needed to survive and occasionally seek serenity in their tortured lives. Death was now the only release awaiting them.

The poor, innocent factory workers nearby were just fresh meatâ€”and they didn't even know it.

Justin glanced back to all his friends in front of him, scared out of their minds, yet unaware of what loomed beyond. It was lose-lose for them all, now.

"Game over." Justin mumbled.

The only ones he could ever hope to call friends were doomed by his actions.

Justin then locked eyes with Sergei, gazed straight into him, giving him a smile only the Devil himself could understand.

Basking in his ultimate defeat, though, something became apparent to Justin as he stared into Sergei's eyes. Almost as suddenly as he realized the awful act about to occur just outside the break room, he knew it could also be the olive branch to his immediate enemy. Surely, the creatures now infiltrating the factory would turn all those in it into death-seekers. There was no stopping that. Consequently, everyone inside the break room would be cornered after the blood bath was over. That meant the biggest threat would soon be these creatures, not thugs and gangsters.

He looked back into the bay once again.

Traxus IX's employees worked hard. And not just nowâ€”they worked hard day in and day out. They earned an honest living like no other in the universe. They were laborers with dirty hands and a clean conscience. In the midst of Justin's mind-numbing remorse for all those about to be devoured, he smiled knowing that something yet again worked in his favorâ€”that whatever God there was out there would shortly drag along this puppet show along one more time and spare him. In his earliest days at Traxus IX, Justin had protected them. Now, it was their time to return the favor. Those poor, brave souls out there were now his saviors, his sacrificial lambsâ€”each and every precious one of them.

But it was all for naught if Justin couldn't facilitate the opportunity he saw materializing. He had to convince his enemies to form a team. He himself had to be the catalyst for it to work.

"Are you paying attention?!" Sergei shouted.

Justin lowered his weapon with haunted eyes and half a smile, ever glancing out the window.

"Now," Sergei said, "we complete the deal. You will take me to the weapons stockpile, and after that I'll decide if I still need you."

Boldly, Justin looked back to him. "Oh, I think we'll _all_ need each other now." He pointed out the window. "Take a look."

Justin's timing couldn't have been more picture perfect—literally. The parasitic monsters had amassed near the first line of conveyors, picking their targets in earnest. It was time. And Sergei and everyone else in the room had front row seats to the horror show.

They lashed out one by one.

Helpless, innocent victims fell under their razor-tipped tentacles, totally taken by surprise.

Like a tempest wave, the chaos instantly spread. Before most of the workers even knew there was an alien presence in the factory, they were attacked with overwhelming force. Because of this, there was no escape for them. The creatures devoured every living thing in sight, wave after wave of them crawling further into the complex like the footsteps of a trampling titan, inexorable and true. They crawled on the floor, they crawled along the walls, the support girders and the trusses overhead, swarming every nook and cranny to consume their prey from all imaginable vectors.

As Justin focused in on one particular victim, coincidentally everyone else inside the break room did too. He was right outside, hands pressed against and clawing at the glass. It was a middle-aged man probably in his fifties with bright, blonde hair and brawny arms. He hadn't one chance to stand against that onslaught as four or five of the critters engulfed him, their exact number too difficult to ascertain as they moved so swiftly. One of them instantly punctured a large hole into his chest and burrowed inside as the other ones scrambled further onward. In an instant, it seemed, he was resurrected from the creature within after a fit of intense, convulsive thrashing on the epoxy-resin floor.

Those fortunate few positioned further down the assembly line unknowingly inherited a morsel of precious time. Time enough to witness the horrors in the distance. They made a run for it, God only knew where to. Anywhere but here.

Blood spurted. Bodies crashed to the ground. Rib cages shattered as the parasites forced themselves into their new hosts. It all happened in the same amount of time it took a person to conjure a memory. The entire scene was magnificent as it was terrifying, the taken bodies wasting no time and now chasing after the living. They followed them to the end of the line, running outside, until they completely vanished from sight and sound. They'd follow them into eternity.

All was quiet as the workers fled in panic, a horde of zombies chasing. That left one or two of them lurking around the interior with nothing to do, as well as a host of the smaller, multi-legged

variety at their feet.

Justin inhaled deeply through the nose and slowed his breathing, then looked back at everyone else in the room.

One of Sergei's men lost aim on one of his captives and fumbled with his weapon, eyes darting all across the surface of the window pane. "What the hell is this?!"

Justin replied instantly, "It's exactly what you think it is."

The captor looked to Justin, saw nothing in his eyes. He then looked outward, then back to Justin, back to the bay, lips pursed.

"I think you'll want to let us all go. It's all about survival now."

Sergei tore his awestruck gaze away from the window and instantly composed himself. "You are in no position to dictate terms here." He said, managing to match Justin's cool.

"No. 'Cause do you see what's happening here? I'll tell you what's happening here. The way I see it, we have two choices now. We can keep playing our game. You can head to the 'Yard, take what you need, take on those things alone while you bust outta here. Or," Justin placed his hands on his hips and gestured to the window from over his shoulder, "we can place a gun in the hands of every rotten son-of-a-bitch in this room and fight these things together. Only then can we actually survive this. Greater numbers equals more guns, equals greater chance of survival."

The warlord glared at Justin, but behind that glare there was a great deal of thought. Justin could practically see neurons firing behind his eyes.

Justin preempted the direction of the conversation. "You just saw how quickly those things can kill. What'll it be? Temporary truce?"

Sergei once again looked out the window, thankful for the fact that it was opaque to the creatures outside. The bodies that turned just moments ago had sprouted several whip-like tentacles from their forearms. Slick globs of blood soaked them from the carnage they'd produced a moment ago.

"Temporary." He answered.

"Good." Justin addressed the room with his head up high and his voice loud and clear. He quickly bent down and picked his shotgun off the floor. "Everyone play nice—and work together! We can kill ourselves later. Right now, we have to kill _them _to survive. Everyone grab a weapon. We're not staying here much longer."

"We're safe in here," one of the Kaiser's men said, "so why leave?"

"How long do you think we'll last with no food and water?"

"But they'll eventually wander away. They don't know we're in here, and we'll be free to go when they lose interest. We've got weapons

regardless."

"That's exactly my point. We have the weapons to take them out now before they spread even further. You're right, they will eventually leave. But when we meet them again, it'll be too big a threat to make a stand againstâ€¦and there'll be nowhere to hide. We have to put a stop to this now."

"What makes you so adamant?" Sergei asked.

"Because they won't stop. Their only purpose is to kill."

"You've dealt with them before?"

"Remember? Spiders?" Justin stood idly for a moment and watched cautiously as the hostile men in the room reluctantly placed a gun or two in the hands of their hostages, at which point Bill declined the offer.

Justin reached in his pocket, grabbed a handful of shotgun shells and started feeding them into the receiver one by one. Once full, he racked a round and placed another into the receiver to fill it completely.

"You were empty." Sergei stated. "You came in here dry."

Justin smiled.

"Now that's a poker face you can't fuck with." Joe quipped.

It was all worked out. Nearly every person in the break room now had a weapon in their clutches. A single, cohesive group, more or less on Justin's lead, was armed to the teeth despite uneasy stares emanating from both sides.

"Holy shit," Joe suddenly blurted as he inspected a pistol up close, then whispered, "this is a Nineteen-Eleven."

"And what is that?" Ken asked after he pivoted about to face him.

Joe looked up and noticed the wary stare from him. "Sorry," Joe said as he set the firearm gently down on a table, "it's a World War Two vintage. Forty-five cal, two-toned finish. Very rare. Very reliable."

Ken pursed his chin and nodded. "Looks heavy."

"It's in excellent shape. Who's is this?" Joe's gaze wandered around the room.

"That'd be mine." Sergei announced.

"I almost don't even want to fire this."

"Then don't." Sergei smiled callously. "In fact, I'd appreciate it if you didn't."

"Well, unless they come for me personally, consider it a virgin."

"I'm good to go." Justin announced as he procured a weapon strap from Ken, who preferred to hoist his MA5B at Port Arms rather than sling it over his shoulder. Justin fastened it to both ends of the shotgun and draped it loosely over his back, the barrel pointing upwards. The two submachine guns that Sergei himself lent him rested on a table, fully loaded with extra mags already deep in his pockets. "Is everyone else satisfied?" He asked impatiently.

No one answered.

"Good. Now if we can make it to the vehicles, there are extra shotguns there, courtesy of Paulie and his goons .So, if no one has any objections, we're gonna storm outta here in about two minutes and we're gonna make a dash for the Mongooses or whatever vehicles are still left out there. Where we go is really a result of what we deal with once we get outside. I know of a few safe places if it all goes to hell, but it all depends."

"Depends on what?" Joe asked.

"On how well we work together and survive."

With that, everyone made final preparations. They each went through the arduous task of loading round after individual round into magazines, and with the magazines still separated, they dry-fired their weapons. All the mechanical parts of each weapon seemed to be in good working order despite the hostile treatment they received over the years of residing in Traxus IX climate. So they began to chamber rounds.

Justin took notice of one of Sergei's men, particularly the way he favored a grip over some weapon.

"You ever fire that thing?"

"Uh, no."

"God damnit, then keep your finger off that trigger until you're ready to fire the fucker. And...holy shit...is your safety off?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You will take the safety off when you're ready to fire!" Justin scolded him with fiery eyes. "Who the hell taught you to shoot, Dick Cheney?"

"Who the hell is Dick Cheney?"

"Exactly. Keep the safety on at all times unless you plan to kill or maim something! Hell, I'm already draggin' one kid around here. What do I gotta do, tie your shoes for you?!"

There was nothing uttered as Justin held his hard gaze. The man didn't respond, just simply complied and flicked the safety lever on with an angered demeanor.

Chris couldn't help but grin.

"And don't even get me started on you." Justin turned to Chris. "Do you even know how to work this? Gimme that thing."

Justin snatched a pistol from Chris' hands. "Uh-huh, M6G Magnum, UNSC standard issue. We'll see if you can handle the recoil. In the meantime, try not to shoot anyone in the back like Cheney over there."

While everyone was getting ready to make their run, Joe took the opportunity to approach Justin—who noticed something intent in the marooned commander's eyes as he neared.

"What is it, Hendricksson?"

"Hey," Joe whispered, "you're not thinking of sticking with these guys, are you?"

"Not if I can help it." Justin replied. "But until we can get to a safe place, we'll need them around for the firepower and ammo—they brought plenty of it. First chance we get though, we'll leave them. Or we'll kill them if we have to. Tell the others to stick close together and wait for my signal, because we'll need to act at a moment's notice. We'll only get one chance."

"That makes me feel a whole lot better."

"Glad to hear it." Justin said. He walked off and placed his hand on the doorknob.

"Wait!" someone shouted.

Justin looked over to who it was—the crippled, elderly man named Jaggo. Terror had engulfed his one eye. "Not yet." he said, unholstering a weapon. "Okay, okay, now I'm ready."

"Oh, good, I am so glad that you are now ready. You and your superior fighting skill." Justin said. "I was doubtful we'd make it outta here, but now I'm comforted that you are finally ready."

Jaggo scoffed back.

Everyone gathered around the door in a single file line. Justin looked back at them all and evaluated their appearance. Though, demeanor alone couldn't reveal one's will to cope and survive—at least not all of the time. He said, "I know this sounds strange, but cover each other's asses. Look out for one another. Everyone of us we lose is another one gained for them, so don't get complacent. These things come out of the woodwork like a pissed-off army of fire ants. Reload fast. Aim for the chest; that's where they like to settle in."

Justin opened the door.

And the monsters were immediately alerted to their presence. They charged.

Justin bounded down the short set of steps leading up to the break room and found himself stunned at how fast the zombies were. One such creature was already within spitting distance by the time he set foot on the bay floor. He instantly dropped his twin SMGs and reached for

his shotgun. Just before it was too late, he fired a slug into the zombie's torso, a thunderous echo filling the factory as the attacker staggered. A gaping hole erupted from its back, taking out much of the victim's spine as well as the parasite clinging to it. Bone fragments and pulverized organs smacked on the smooth floor, glistening in the overhead fluorescence. More zombies appeared at the entrances, attracted by the mayhem, charging their way in.

Justin bent down and scooped his primary guns off the floor and sent them blazing at full auto, peppering as many of the crawling parasites possible while all the others sent a myriad of projectiles in all directions, all directed at the larger threats.

Justin felt comforted by the sight of a handful of zombies falling, but just like them his elation soon plummeted to the ground as the sound of gunfire was no longer prevalent in the cavernous bay.

Silence. Not a sound in the bay except the sickness of slimy feet and tentacles skittering across the floor to meet them.

Justin looked back: everyone was reloading after expending all their ammunition.

"God damnit, stagger your fire!" He shouted. "I should not hear silent weapons!"

He reached for his shotgun and took out two zombies on approach, totally unaided of cover fire for the moment. That left five more shots until reload, with four new zombies entering the side entrance. He wished then that the others would be more cognizant of weapon protocol like he was, but this was no time to give a crash course in battle doctrine. They were all struggling as it was.

And even though they were dishing out a healthy beating to the oncoming parasite hordes thus far, only more and more of them showed up to the firefight—as though they were multiplying for every one extinguished. The parasite onslaught was already wearing their defenses.

"We can't sit here! We need to move!" Justin said as he became pitilessly aware of that fact.

He rose from his crouch and trotted in the general direction of the vehicles—racking and firing, racking and firing. Blast after blast of the 8-gauge shotgun sent his targets to the ground. This time, with ample and staggered covering fire from the others, he had the freedom to reload without consequence. Just then, he looked up and found a clutch of crawling parasites loitering around the group of vehicles near the entrance. Cautious to make sure that no zombies were on approach, he grabbed his SMGs and poured everything he could into them, without hitting the ATVs. The mass of infectious creatures did more work than Justin did to alleviate them, for each one that received hits instantly popped into fleshy tendrils that started a chain reaction. They all exploded into stringy, wet ribbons. This was good for ammo conservation.

He reached full view of the bay doors and looked outside.

The courtyard was filled with chaos and death. Factory workers had

stumbled outside from the other complex as well, running and fleeing for their lives. Zombies and parasites and terrified people were everywhere. It was quite clear that the creatures had infiltrated most of the populated centers of the city, and quite possibly all of the city. It seemed as though the only beings with any clue were Justin and those he led. "Everyone get over here!" Justin shouted. "Give me some cover and make sure they don't get inside!"

But they already were inside. There were too many entrances to cover, such as the ones farther down the complex, out of range. The factory was indeed surrounded. But with suppressive fire, each person eventually made their way to the group of vehicles at the main entrance, a place where they could form a sort of phalanx around Justinâ€"provide spherical coverage.

Unbeknownst to Justin, though, a trio of zombies were hugging the outside wall. Attracted by the noise, they were creeping closer to the entrance where he resided just inside.

He walked over to where he laid down the fuel canisters and started to fill his vehicle up.

"What are you doing?" the Kaiser asked.

"We won't get very far without fuel in our tanks." Justin replied.

The Kaiser resumed fire, content with what Justin said. It was him, Chris and most of his men shooting out into the courtyard at any zombie that so much as looked in their general direction. For now, the townspeople running wild out there were the creatures' main source of food, and it kept them occupied and oblivious to Justinâ€"tending to the ATVs.

The three zombies on a mission crept closer, just outside the periphery of Chris' and Sergei's vision. They stealthily reached the lip of the threshold. A tentacle appeared at the opening and it lashed out.

One of Kaiser's men fell from a vicious swipe to the chest, a fatal wound. Blood gushed out like flood waters from a breached levy. The follow through from such a powerful blow caught the Kaiser as well.

"AHHHH!" he screamed.

Chris wheeled around just in time to see that three of the humanoid monsters were right upon him. All the men around him were either on the ground or awestruck. He lifted up the pistol without thought and squeezed off three rounds. And three zombies instantly fell to the concrete, crashing down limply right next to the Kaiser's feet.

It was over. Chris, wide-eyed, stared at the pistol in his handsâ€"still vibrating from the recoil.

"Good shooting, kid." Sergei said, picking himself up.

"You're bleeding." Chris replied.

"Just a scratch." Sergei said, regarding his forearm.

Inside, the picture looked a little clearer. Hendricksson, Ken and a few of the Kaiser's men actually surmounted over the wavering pockets of creatures pouring in from any available opening, but they kept coming from every direction. The only reason Joe and everyone else was still alive was that they had an overwhelming amount of firepower on their side. At any rate, Joe surmised that they were actually cleaning up and decided to step to the entrance and help out Chris and Sergei. Before he could do so, Justin pulled on one of his pantsâ€”he was clearly agitated while he fueled up the ATVs.

Justin's mind was in three places: at his hands pouring the fuel; to every facility entrance; and to Joe. He shouted amidst all the gunfire, "They're coming from everywhere! This city is overrun! We have to make for the Lookout Tower! Or we're dead!"

"Where's that?"

"At the foot of the courtyard. Tallest structure in the inner sanctum. You can't miss it."

"What's there?"

"A better view." Justin waved him off. "Keep giving me cover, take my SMGs. Won't be much longer."

And Joe proceeded outside to lend an extra set of guns to the fight. As he neared the entrance, the giant square outside filled his vision. "My God." he whispered, looking over the carnage-filled expanse. Bodiesâ€”living, dead, or undeadâ€”were everywhere. Whether they were broken and strewn about the immense concrete slab, or whether they were running mad, the place was a zoo. "What is going on here?" he whispered.

He shook it off and dug in with Chris and Sergei, picking targets diligently where it matteredâ€”often the enemies within closest proximity.

Things were copasetic for the time being. The influx of zombies and parasites was currently just a steady ebb and surge, like the entire mass of them behaved as one in their quest for flesh. But this was only from their point of view. The zombie situation across the courtyard was something entirely different.

Just then, a bang resounded off every surface, deafening everyone momentarily. And a plume of heat engulfed the entrance, as did a concussive wave. Glaring red light saturated the courtyard, wavering from side to side.

The light's intensity oscillated as Joe peered across the way. Over the span of the entire vestibule, which was filled with pure and violent chaos, there was one human. They were pinned against the other factory's wall, hands clenched around the nozzle of a thick hose. They swept it side to side as flammable propellant spewed out of it, into the fray. Any parasitic creature within a 20-meter radius was sent ablaze by this lone survivor. Chris cheered at the site as reflections of crimson shone in his eyes.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" shouted Joe. "Crispy critters, get 'em while they're hot!"

Justin peered around the edge of the entrance as the beautiful flames slithered side to side, glowing a pleasant amber-red. And in between each fiery swing of its undulation, he could see the face of its operator more clearly. He dropped the fuel container and stood up.

It was Layla.

Justin fired up a Mongoose, catching everyone's attention. Before they could even grasp what was going through his head, Justin blasted through the entrance straight into hell.

On his way out, any creature within arm's reach lashed out at him, some of them still on fire. Justin had speed and momentum on his side, but they were the only advantages against their elongated tentacle swipes. What it amounted to was misjudgment by the monsters, and thus hard striking at the farings on either side of the ATV. A few lucky ones found marks on Justin's legs, ripping through fabric and breaking skin. The velocity he possessed aboard the ATV only doubled the pain. He gritted teeth and kept his gaze trained ahead towards Layla, though. She was all alone.

She must've seen the ATV's headlights parting through the ash and chaosâ€"she cut off the flow of Hydrogen to her nozzle, risking parasite retaliation. She was now on borrowed time as she waited for her savior. But the Mongoose only picked up more speed, mowing down any creature in its path. Justin approached fast.

With a forceful steering input at the last second, he jerked the ATV one way and nailed the emergency brake simultaneously, causing an oversteer that put the rear boot pad within good proximity of her. With only a slight loss in the Mongoose's speed, Layla jumped aboard and held on tight through the apex of the vehicle's power slide. She grabbed onto Justin's shoulders and ducked as low as possible while gouts of flame and crowds of tentacles lashed out at them.

Justin punched through the horde and found a relatively vacant area at the far side of the courtyard. Once safe, he slowed the ATV and righted it around, facing back to the zombies that plagued the courtyardâ€"as if he were the wild bull making another pass.

Most of the zombies that chased the two of them had now placed their attention on the factory entrance where the others were shooting.

"Thanks for rescuing me." Layla said from over his shoulder.

"No problem."

"You're bleeding."

"No problem. What about you?"

"I'm fine. So what are we gonna do?"

"We're gonna get to a safer place."

"What about them?"

"They're on their own now. They know where to find us."

23. Hardluck Solution

__Hardluck Solution**__**

On the other side of the courtyard, Justin and Layla lingered in relative safety, away from the fray. Justin idled the Mongoose for a moment. There, at the base of the Eastern spire that towered over the city, he watched what was left of the group still at the factory entrance. They defended their position valiantly. Their aim and discipline under the parasite assault had improved rather remarkably. Justin almost entertained the impulse to ride back there and pitch inâ€"show the zombies that humans weren't on the menu tonight. But even more than that, he had to make sure his friends were okayâ€"everyone but the Kaiser and his men, of course. Now, though, there was little he could do.

But Justin had disclosed the rendezvous point to Hendricksson. The man was a military commander from some distant planet, from some distant time. He would know what to do. Attain accountability of everyone, make sure they were alive and firing, to lead them to safety. Justin was counting on him now.

He watched a few more pulses of light emanate from muzzle flashes beyond the way before turning the 'Goose around. Ahead now, was the darkness of the stockyard tunnel.

-

At the entrance to the factory, the zombies came in waves. In and out, lull and surge. The zombies' tactics, if any, were unusual. They were happy to throw themselves into a hail of bullets, so long as others of their kind had a shot at the groupâ€"even if it was just one person. They were undoubtedly united in their cause and fearless of death as well. Such an enemy could surely outlast any fighting force. The only thing that could possibly allow the humans to win against such an adversary was strength of arms. Guns and plenty of ammunitionâ€"which was dwindling with every barrage.

Joe took notice as he reached for his last clip. "The next break they give us, we're outta here!"

"Where are we going?" Chris asked after firing two shots. "And where's Justin?"

"Justin's at the lookout tower. And that's where we're going. We're taking as many vehicles as we can. They should be fueled up." Joe finished with a three-round burst to an approaching mass of parasites. He then rushed over to a Mongoose and fired it up, retaking his position to sight up more targets. And they just kept coming.

"And what then?" the Kaiser asked. "Take in the scenery?"

Joe took aim, and then lost it an instant later. "â€|I don't know. He just said there was a better view up there, that's all." He aimed again, fired another short burst.

The Kaiser thought for a moment. He smiled. "It's a good plan."

Their defense wasn't much as they prepared to flee the factory, but the zombies were a comfortable distance away. This allowed Joe to drop out of the ranks of shooters and tend to each Mongoose, firing them all up. He looked around and assessed the scene—the bay, the vehicles and the courtyard. "Okay! Everyone: fire everything you got and then get on an ATV!"

An instant later, the bay and the courtyard outside became one continuous roar as everyone fired at once. An entire wave of zombies and parasites at their feet fell, another wave rushing up from the main tunnel to replace them. Seconds later, dry clicks reached everyone's ears. Their weapons were empty. It was time to leave.

"Go! Go! GO!" Joe shouted.

Everyone ran to the vehicles idling in wait. They all mounted up, goosing the throttle and zooming out into the horror-filled night.

"Follow me!" Joe said from over his shoulder.

To the right, a carpet of parasites emerged from the main tunnel. To the left, across the blood-drenched courtyard, was the great spire and the tunnel beneath it.

-

Justin's Mongoose shone the way, its single headlamp casting a narrow cone of light into the swallowing darkness. They were more than half way to their destination. Layla had pillion, holding on tight to Justin, her arms wrapped around his waist rather than the rear handle. It made her feel safer, and Justin didn't mind her touch either. But his attention was most certainly ahead, searching for any threat in the narrow passageway. The solid walls, floor and ceiling stretched on and on, sucking up the headlamp's luminosity. Justin was careful not to overdrive the headlight. At this speed and RPM, the bulwark around them amplified the Mongoose's growl, making it sound more like a feline driven into a corner—an allegory to their current predicament.

Justin slowed a little and spoke over his shoulder, "Do you know how to fire a gun?"

"My father taught me how. Refresh me a little and I'll kick some ass."

"Okay."

Justin once again placed full attention back to the front. Immediately, he squeezed the brake lever.

Layla peered over his shoulder into the distance, to where the light from the Mongoose just about died out. There, in the middle of the road, were two objects blocking their path. Two figures, vaguely biped, just standing there, not moving.

"Get ready." Justin said.

They started to pulsate, bobbing up and down, walking.

"The entrance to the tower is right there. " Justin said again. "You have to really hold on now."

She squeezed his waist even tighter.

He switched to high beams. It didn't yield that much better of a result, but at least he could blind them for a bit if they were not human. He looked up ahead hard and gave it his best estimate at distance. Not tolerating a chance at second guess, he gunned it. The Mongoose darted forth, its cowl devouring the road in front of it. Layla held on, only squeezed tighter despite the forward inertia wearing off.

As if to confirm Justin's suspicions, he could see the figures up ahead now running at full speed as well. They were zombies.

Justin shouted, "The door is up ahead! Get ready to get off and follow me!"

She nodded, her cheek pushed up against the back of his shoulder.

Justin depressed the brake with all his strength and the ATV's knobby tires chirped once, and then skidded the Mongoose to an abrupt halt.

Justin grabbed Layla's hand. "C'mon!"

She dismounted with him and ran up a curb. Immediately in front of them were the outlines of a door recessed into the wall. Justin pushed it open and they scrambled in. They could hear the echoes of footsteps rapidly approaching, scuffling and stammering towards them. Justin slammed the door shut and held his weight up against it. "Find some lights!" he shouted to Layla.

She searched the room—"it was all but totally dark. "I can't see anything!" she replied.

"Here," Justin said, maintaining pressure on the door as he reached into his pocket, "my lighter."

She took it from his hand and sparked it up. "There!" she said. "Pull chain above your head."

With one hand, Justin reached up and gave it a yank. An overhead light flickered on, revealing a cubical room with empty shelves along the walls. More importantly, there was a padlock hanging from the door latch. Justin reached for it and was thrown back as he did—"the door flew open on his face. He shoved his foot inwards and caved the door back in, at which point an awful shriek nearly robbed him of hearing. Just outside the door, two zombies could be seen through the peephole, salivating and clawing. They were overpowering.

"Hand me the lock. Quick!"

Layla dashed forth and snatched the lock off the fixture. The door

flew open again. Justin used all his might to close it this time, right as one of the creature's arms entered the threshold. The door slammed, breaking the arm clean off. Half of it fell to the floor as the door closed. Layla immediately shoved the lock in place and snapped it shut. Justin gave the dial one full twist to the left to fully extend the bolt as furious pounding emanated through the hatch not a second later. He took a few breaths, as did Layla.

"We're safe."

"Should we go up top?" she asked.

"Yeah, let's go."

"Oh! Wait! What about the others? They'll be coming this way, won't they?"

"Shit. I forgot about that. Okay—we'll wait here until we hear gunfire. When it gets quiet again, we'll wait for the good guys to knock."

"Sounds easy enough." she said.

-

Joe led the way to the tunnel with Bill, Ken, Chris, Kaiser and all his men rolling out behind him. They had spanned the courtyard quickly in order to get out of sight from the critters crawling into the inner sanctum.

They had just entered the tunnel.

Total, complete and uncompromising emptiness enveloped them. It was pure blackness, with only meager vehicle headlamps attempting to fill it with illumination. What the single light bulbs of the Mongoose flock amounted to was 75 meter's worth of depth perception. Any speed over a glide and they'd be in for a _sudden _surprise if there was any.

"I hope there's more ammo in the stockyard." Ken said from pillion.

"I hope so too." Joe said. "My gut tells me we're gonna need it soon."

If only Joe knew just how soon it would be.

-

A few minutes went by inside the base of the spire, Justin and Layla just waiting. It felt more like thirty. The room was simple and small, almost confining. There was no other way to go but up.

"I'm gonna go to the top for a look." Justin said. "I'll be back in a minute."

"No, don't leave me here."

Justin thought for a moment. He needed someone to stay here to let the good guys in when they arrived. Then again, the zombies had their

ways; there was a chance they could break in, and Layla would be all alone if it happened.

"C'mon."

Justin led Layla to the flight of stairs nestled in the corner of the room. Up they went.

The steps were old, solid stone. The air was heavy with moisture and minerals, most certainly a welcomed change from years of heavy industry and chemical vapor. And the ascent was confining, the width of the rungs only enough to pass one person at a time. The ceiling was especially low as well, as it loomed right above their heads in a way proportional to Traxus IX's cloud-ceiling.

After what seemed like a session of calisthenics, they had finally ascended all 20 flights and reached the top. Justin propped open a wooden hatch and a cold breeze whisked in. He climbed the last few steps and helped Layla reach the summit with an outstretched arm. They now occupied a wide landing, the highest point in the entire city. A slight amount below, the courtyard lights beamed all around the floor of the courtyard, back-reflected light seeping around the edges of their focused fixtures. They were as safe as could be, yet totally isolated from anywhere else by the same token. However, they could see for miles, which was exactly why Justin had come here.

"Here!" Justin said, walking over to one ledge.

Mounted on Northern wall was a rotary scope. From here, they could get a 360 degree view of the lands all around City 17. Justin peered into it and rotated it about to face West, the sleeve bearing inside almost totally rusted as it shrieked with every movement he gave it. He nudged it to a slight downward angle such that it could view the courtyard. It was almost barren of activity. Joe and the others were no longer there, which either meant they had left—or they were dead. The only presence below was the smaller critters, the ones that turned humans into murderous zombies.

Justin let go of the scope and looked to Layla. "Well, wanna go back downstairs and wait for the others?"

"Sure."

Before Justin opened the hatch to descend, a faint glow caught the side of Layla's tender face. It was pleasant orange at first, barely visible in the dark so high up. But it instantly blossomed into an angry red that expanded upon her face, lighting up her eyes. Justin turned to see what it was.

Far out, deep into the northern plain was a massive fireball. It mushroomed high into the air, easily jutting up into the cloud layer where it backlit the foggy mass like a lamp behind Japanese Shoji. Justin stepped back into the scope and swung it about to face due North. A better view now, he could make out the source of the explosion—a chemical processing plant sent ablaze. It was not tied to City 17, too far out. But he could also make out dozens of people running and screaming. And behind all of those people, like an organized wave of an army, were hundreds of men and boys toting weapons, marching down upon the small town.

"What do you see?" Layla asked.

"I see pointless genocide all over again."

"The Kaiser's men?"

"Yes."

"You were here for the first War, right?"

"Yes. I saw it all."

"Why is he doing this? Why are _they _doing this?"

"Because Kaiser Sergei is their God. And people will kill for their God."

Layla almost had the urge to look into the scope and see for herself, but she took Justin at his word, figured it was senseless war waged by senseless people.

She, like many others, didn't know the real story.

-

Kaiser Sergei trailed just behind Joe and Ken, steadily coasting through the tunnel. He had insisted to his men that he have a Mongoose all to himself. They didn't like the idea at first, their leader being all alone, particularly vulnerable. They usually preferred to keep him shielded from any threat out in the open. But he had assured them back at the factory that it was for the better—"if they ran into alien trouble, the Kaiser could escape with speed on his side, and live to fight another day. They then readily agreed in this logic.

Sergei looked at his fuel gauge just to make sure he could at least get somewhere outside City 17 in such an event. He squinted but could not read the gauge. He leaned to one side so a trailing ATV could light up his instrument cluster for him. Now, he saw that he had a little more than half a tank. This, he surmised, was good enough.

Just as he placed his eyes back in front to the road, he was met with a panorama of red. The ATVs in front rapidly approached his own. He nailed the brake. "Shit!" he said. "Stop a little quicker next time. I almost smashed into ya."

"Shh!" Ken said, idling in front.

Joe turned around to face the rest of the pack. "See that?"

Kaiser and all his men looked on ahead, where Ken and Bill's Mongooses headlamps flooded the way. There, standing perfectly still, were two people. But everyone knew better. They weren't people at all. They were zombies. People don't just lollygag in the middle of a road, full of ATVs.

"Fuck." one of the Kaiser's men said. "What do we do?"

"We have no ammunition." Joe announced.

"Can't we just truck 'em?" Chris asked from Bill's pillion.

"You meanâ€|run them over?"

"Yeah!"

"Noâ€|it's too risky. They could still fuck you up."

"It's our best option. Their standing in our way. I doubt they'll let us skimp by without a toll."

"You got that right."

"So, what are we gonna do?!" Kasier's man asked again.

"â€|You heard the kid," Ken said, "truck 'em!!"

Ken twisted the throttle all the way home and the lead Mongoose churned up a rooster tail of dust and exhaust high into the air. He and Joe rapidly accelerated towards the two zombies. Chris, figuring there was strength in numbers and in all the weight they possessed aboard the ATVs, shouted to Bill, "GO!!"

Bill instantly obeyed and followed Ken and Joe. Kaiser and all his men mirrored.

They were all locked in a one-way stampede towards fate.

-

Justin and Layla descended the stairs. With every step, they were met with a subtle echo of their own footfalls. They were surrounded by stone on all sides. It was rather confining, but at least they knew nothing could get to them. They proceeded downwards with confidence.

Layla broke the silence of their descent.

"You're kinda quiet, huh?"

"I don't talk much."

"I've watched you around the factory."

Justin didn't know what to say. "â€|Okay."

"You've watched me, too."

Justin didn't answer.

"Of all the guys I could be paired with in this mess, I lucked out with you, didn't I?"

"Well, I consider myself a survivor. I've been keeping everyone else alive too."

"So I've heard."

"Wait!" Justin said, stopping short. "Do you hear that?"

Justin and Layla had almost reached the ground floor. "I hear _something_." she replied.

"C'mon!"

Justin rushed down the last set of landings and pressed an ear up to the door. "It's gotta be them."

Justin could hear something getting louder. It sounded like a swarm of mosquitoes, bitter reminders of the climates on other colonies he toured during his time as a Marine. But he filtered the noise out, realizing that a dense tunnel would distort any sound passing through it. He pictured the noise out in the open rather than confined. It was undoubtedly Mongooses speeding at wide open throttle. "I hope they see them in time." Justin said.

"I'm sure they will." Layla answered. "Hard to miss zombies."

"Ah, the hell with this!" Justin shouted, undoing the door lock.

"You're going outside?!" she yelled.

He pulled the door open and peered out into the tunnel. A flock of headlights shone right into his face and sped ever closer. They were right upon him, the light so intense that he had to close his eyes. There was a loud _thwack! _And a splash of thick liquid showered his face and seeped into the doorway as the lights faded. He wiped it away and looked down. He was covered in strange fluid, stinking to high heaven. He looked out into the open. Ken, Joe, Bill, Chris and everyone else came rushing to him. A few meters in front laid the corpses of two zombies in the middle of the tunnel—the same zombies that came across his path moments ago.

"Ha!" Ken laughed. "Good timing, Justin! Thought you'd step outside for a zombie entrail shower?"

Everyone burst out into laughter.

"Right, now get in!" Justin shouted. "More will be on the way!"

-

Everyone gathered inside the ground floor of the spire. The room was abuzz with dull conversation as everyone came back to their normal senses. To Justin's discontent, Kaiser and his men were here as well. He leaned over to Joe. "You couldn't ditch him?"

"No. There was no way I could."

"Fine. We'll have to address that later. Is everyone else okay?"

"I think Bill might be a little shaken up, but everyone's okay. No scratches and no critters."

"Good."

Justin started walking up the stairs and a moment later, everyone else followed as if on autopilot. Joe made it a point to be the trailing person, the last to ascend. He also made sure Bill stayed behind as well.

"So does this Sergei fellow know that Justin was the Marine from that day?"

"_No. _And don't give that away. Only ones who know that are Ken and I, and now you."

"Okay, no problem. Just wanted to stay in the loop of things."

-

Justin cleared the top and waited there in the cold wind for everyone to reconvene.

The next up was Layla, followed by Ken, Chris, and Kaiser Sergeiâ€”smirking that typical smile of his as he met Justin's eyes. Everyone else cleared the summit and Bill swung the hatch shut.

Justin waited for a moment for everyone to get used to the scenery. And in perfect silence, he panned over to the Northern horizon. Small patches of fire and smoke still rose upwards from the great explosion earlier. He then looked back to the Kaiser.

"What?" Sergei said with a smile. "Okay, I jumped the gun a little. I assumed you'd come through with the deal, so I ordered my soldiers to begin. I didn't hear from Paulie, it was already too late. Guess it matters little, now. Your spiders have done more work than I could do. But I never forget a business deal, so don't think that just because we're playing 'enemy of my enemy' that you can skate away from your obligation. I want my supplies."

Justin surveyed the mayhem through the scope once again. Shanty homes and vehicles and corpses were on fire, lying facedown in the dirt. And there was no telling when the parasites and zombies would arrive to that giant signal flare. There was even no telling how far along they were by nowâ€”maybe to the next city.

"So it comes back to square one, then." Justin said. "Have you learned nothing over the last ten years?"

The distant fires did not reflect in Sergei's eyes as they had in Layla's. But like most people, the blossoming orange and red hues captivated him. He replied flatly, "I wouldn't expect you to understand." without eye contact.

"THI won't have it, you know. They'll send the New Model Army down here again. Is that what you wanted out of all this? Armageddon part two?"

"No. _You_ started Armageddon when you brought your creatures to the surface. My operations are guaranteed not to impact the industry. People worse than us made this world, and it was supposed to be the time to return the favor once all these obstacles to progress were removed."

"We _will_ _eradicate_ this parasite. But youâ€¦you couldn't let bygones be fucking bygones. You had to have your empire back or you wouldn't know what to do with yourself. And now we're condemned. Thanks."

"Don't thank me, thank you local administrator."

"That's right, keep going the course. Keep thinking it's all a joke. And then when enough people die, the New Model Armyâ€¦just like beforeâ€¦comes down here and kills everything in sight."

"It's what they do."

"Yeah, no shit it's what they do."

"I meant my soldiers."

"What, they follow your suicidal orders?"

"Oh please, you did the same when you were a commissioned officer. Yes, that's right, I've heard you were once UNSC. You killed for someone higher up on the totem pole than you. And you probably got some enjoyment out of it, didn't you? You certainly got paid for it, yes?"

"Fuck you. I followed orders because they were lawful and because they meant something. All this," Justin pointed out to the fire-scorched horizon, "means nothing. What's it all for?"

"It means something to them."

Justin glared. There was just no reasoning with Sergei.

"Hey!" Chris shouted. "A light!"

Everyone wheeled around to where Chris was lookingâ€¦across the square, over the main tunnel, across another courtyard, to the main Admin building. Three stories up and merely a few meters below the cloudy, chemical gloom, a light pulsed on and off.

"It's on the top floor." Ken said. "It's just flashing on and offâ€¦wait. That's Morse Code!"

"Who uses _that_ anymore?" Justin asked.

"Pilots."

"_Pilots?_"

"Among others, yes. Anyone who's required to learn Morse Code usually forgets. It's obsolete, but I can't think of anyone else that would need to know itâ€¦especially here."

"Because there are no pilots around here." Justin added.

"Maybe not, but there's people who've had some amount of flight training."

"Gibson. Can you tell what he's saying?"

"Are you kidding?" Ken said. "I forgot Morse Code long ago."

"Regardless, we still have to get over there. That's our ticket to safety."

-

Again, Justin made ready to set off on another adventure, making little effort to inform those around him of his plans, as usual.

"So what's the plan now, Justin?" Chris asked.

Justin didn't reply. He just kept feeding round after round of ammunition into any magazine or receiver in sight. "I suggest you all do as I do."

With only slight hesitation, everyone there complied, searching the depths of their pockets for any ammo they might've overlooked in their frantic firefight with the zombie hordes only moments ago. Their searched turned up largely inconclusive, but there was little they could do but wait for whatever Justin deemed the next course of action to be. By the nature of the task at hand, they all assumed it wasn't going to be easy, or quick. With only one person equipped with a loaded weapon, they all felt their luck running dry.

Chris clenched his jaw. "I wish you would tell us all what's going on. We don't have to follow you around all the time, you know."

Justin still didn't answer. He only had the mind for preparation this minute. He was done loading. He reached down and retrieved a handful of shells and tapped each one of them against the butt stock, packing the rounds tight on the backside. Satisfied that there was now little likelihood of a jam, he started feeding cartridges into the receiver and it replied to him in its own way, with a pleasing _clack_.

"Here's the plan." Justin said, standing up and ignoring Chris' incessant gaze. "We're going to Admin, to the office that was signaling us. We'll get there from over the rampart."

-

Justin found a foothold in the Southwestern face of the spire. He then found another, followed by a handhold. He now had three points of contact with the rock face. He began to descend the face of the spire, repeating the motions. Everyone began to follow. After a grueling forty-meter downward scale, the lot of them reached the curtain wall that adjoined the thick base of the spire. As each one landed, they regarded the periphery of it. The curtain wall spanned the entire perimeter of the city, breaking just where the tunnel ceiling was. The wall had always kept out the bad. Now, it just enclosed it all in.

But they could traverse the top of it to the outer sanctum the Admin courtyard. In truth, Justin hadn't thought this plan all the

way through. It was actually rather half-assed. Surely, they'd remain unscathed by the zombies as they made their way across the wall—so high up. Unnoticed, too. But once on the ground in the Admin courtyard, it was a Graveball field to the building they were headed to, and God only knew what was in between.

They followed Justin, walking in between widely separated parapets along the top of the South Western curtain wall. At regular intervals, they became shielded on either side by waist-high battlements, offering even more protection. In their case, it was concealment that benefited them most. Stretching even further outward from the wall was the occasional machicolation and chaguette architecture, reminiscent of a primitive and brutal medieval era. But in many ways, life on Traxus IX could hardly differ. Why then should its structures differ? The design of the factory-cities was all the same, which might very well have been just another well-informed decision put into effect by corporate executives—one of many insurance policies to protect its high-demand industry. City 17 certainly wasn't going anywhere by virtue of its structures alone. But weather here was hardly hostile, just dead cold and barren.

It was a quiet and gentle walk down the length of the rampart, zombies and parasites milling about down below. They were oblivious to the survivors' presence. And though they needed to maintain stealth and swiftness to their destination, each one of them couldn't help but briefly study the monsters as they walked on by. They lot of them stood or crawled in one place, a certain rhythm to them as if dancing. Justin grabbed Chris by the shirt collar as he stopped to examine them more closely.

They rounded a narrow bend in the rampart, which told Justin they were more than halfway to the end. Soon, the wall would abruptly stop at the entrance to the tunnel. They'd scale down once more, if they could. The face of the curtain wall was perfectly smooth to prevent intruders from climbing it.

They reached the end. Justin turned to face the group.

He whispered, "Alright, it's only seven meters down to the ground. We can all make it. Just remember to let as much of your body take the fall as possible. Bending your knees won't do it; you'll break them if you try that. When you fall, roll into it. Once you hit that ground, it's everyone for themselves. Haul ass to that building." Justin pointed. "I'll go last."

Justin surveyed the land around the wall. There was no zombie in sight, even though they were stealthy little bastards. And Justin's night vision certainly wasn't what it used to be. Nevertheless, they had to move. The factory complex was overrun with death. And whoever was signaling from inside that building knew Morse Code. This meant they possessed some level of knowledge not common in citizens of Traxus IX. This meant good things.

It was time for Justin to see just how much the odds favored them.

"Jump!"

After Hours Business Meetings

Justin watched them all push over the side of the rampart and fall to the ground one by one. Loud thuds followed, resounding treacherously into the farthest reaches of the deep-shadowed courtyard. Surprisingly, none of them accrued any injuries. They all got back up and ran to their objective. There was no turning back for them. But there, up high in perfect safety, Justin remained a little longer. He might've considered his precaution cowardly were he still a Marine on active duty, treating his fellow survivors as pawns. But here, all that mattered was survival, especially now. Justin looked around and saw nothing but them scurrying away. There were no hordes of zombies or parasites or shadows rushing closer.

It was as if the alien collective had cleaned the area of life and moved on, maybe further into the factories, or maybe completely out of City 17 for that matter. Maybe they had moved on to bigger and better thingsâ€”City 18, 19, and beyond. There was no way for Justin to be sure of anything anymore.

Only one thing could be certain now: they were undetected and everyone had safe passage to Admin, where Gibson supposedly holed himself up in.

Justin bent down and swung both his legs over the ledge. He surveyed the flat ground beneath him, rehearsing the fall in his mind over and over. He counted to three.

He jumped.

The fall took longer than he imagined, and this wasn't exactly a good thing as heights always brought out the worst in him.

His feet struck the unforgiving clay first. Instantly, he let his legs give out like an abused rag doll, tucking his whole body in and rolling into the fall like a pro athlete's practiced form. But he timed it just a tad bit off, too much momentum or too obtuse of an angle.

At the end of his tumble, his head smacked the clay hard.

He was dazed from the impact. No enemy in sight, he rested a bit and let the pain overwhelm him, let it throb deep into his skull hoping it would subside in good time. As the last morsel of aching faded away a moment later, he slowly returned to his feet. Ahead, the Admin building loomed in the middle of a clay panorama, the entrance to the mineshaft residing just beyond perception, a shadowed menace in the distance. He took one step forward and then something dreadful happened.

The voice came back.

Normally, Justin would dismiss it. Tune it out. Not this timeâ€”

It was louder than a freight train, blocking out everything around himâ€”even the sounds of Ken and Bill doubling back and asking if he was okay.

Justin was disoriented in a voice so loud, that his vision swam in

darkness. He reached out for something to grab on to, but he only clutched at heavy air. Realizing there was no attaining balance, he carefully bent down to the ground in the void to avoid falling over. The voice grew louder and louder, crescendoing above all else. But it was nowhere near as violent as the first time. Presently, the deep and timeless rumble was coherent, smooth and calm. Falling to the groundâ€”deafened and blinded by its effortless powerâ€”Justin willingly listened in.

_Why do the ignorant run?
>_What is it you truly fear?
>_If you wish to seek the truth,
>_Then I will show it to you.
>

_I'll take you through a dark placeâ€”
>_Darker than your wildest fears.
>_You'll face them, and erase them.
>_Then, together we will stand._

_Give up your life to be free.
>_It will hurt you only once.
>Just imagine the pure bliss..._
>_No more war, no more sadness,
>_With vic'try everlasting._

The voice altogether vanished as Justin's vision cleared. The last hanging words seemed to subside into the gentle rumble that always lingered in his mind. Justin remained on the ground.

"C'mon!" Ken shouted. "He's not gonna move. You have to help me carry him inside."

"Is the area safe?" Justin heard Chris say.

"Yes!" Bill cried from somewhere far off. "Hurry!"

Too weak to stand, Justin felt his arms being hoisted up over Chris and Ken's shoulders. Justin wasn't sure how long they dragged him, but eventually a pale white light flooded him and glowed right through his closed eyelids. He heard a door slam, and then a series of clicks. Soon after, his body twisted to one side and was lowered onto something very soft and smooth. The many voices of the room faded into one, dull buzz. Feeling no pain, Justin felt his breathing deepen. He went to sleep.

* * *

><p>Justin woke up.<p>

Painful white light pierced his retina. He snapped his eyes shut.

Again, he opened themâ€”this time very slowly. He sat up and looked around: he had been placed on a very comfortable couch. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. The overwhelming luminosity subsided along with minute traces of his headache. He confirmed that he was in the lobby of the Admin building and looked to the entrance, seeing it was bolted shutâ€”good. He rubbed his eyes and stretched. Standing up, the very next thing he caught sight of was a tray of snacks on a

coffee table at the other end of the lobby. He darted towards them, picking the plate clean as he grabbed as many as he could. He wolfed them down like a crazed animal, now searching for something to wash it down with—preferably something cold. He was about to run to a nearby vending machine and bust it open, but he stopped when he saw a blank television. He bent down and turned it on: nothing. Just snowy static.

Justin made his way to the wall adjoining the entrance. He pushed aside a curtain. Past the barred window was the outer courtyard soaked in black night, compressed by a layer of thick fog overhead. The mercury-vapor lamps high above provided little illumination other than a ghostly-white glow behind the mist. The courtyard was totally barren of activity. And the sound of the room was so quiet that it was deafening. He sat back down and tried to force away the mounting panic.

Was everything he just went through a dream? A terrible dream?

No way in hell, he thought. It was too real.

He looked at the screen one last time, hoping something would come on.

Something stole Justin's attention away. He heard a voice—yelling. Then another, and another. The voices of those he knew.

Justin bolted to the staircase. The voices got louder for each step he ascended.

Once on the second floor, he saw Layla, Bill, Ken, Chris, Joe, and everyone else were milling about the doorway to Gibson's office. Justin proceeded closer. As he got within a few footsteps he could see Kaiser Sergei standing near the door. Joe and Bill parted the way for Justin.

"What the hell are you all doing?" Justin asked. "What are you waiting for? Open the door."

The Kaiser looked back at Justin with an almost imperceptible grin.

"Gibson won't open the door." Ken barked.

"Why?"

"Because Sergei's here."

The Kaiser stood back as Justin asserted his place by the door.

"Gibson! It's Reid. We got your signal. It's safe to come out. They won't hurt you, you have my word!"

A single, well-oiled deadbolt slid out of place from the reinforced door jamb, and the doorway slid open. There was Gibson. He looked wired and weary, sweat dripping off his wrinkled brow with a wily-eyed look aimed directly at Kaiser Sergei. "Keep a leash on him, Reid."

"Don't worry about him," Justin said, looking back at Sergei, "he's not as dumb as he looks."

* * *

><p>Everyone, fifteen people in total, stayed within voice range of the second floor. Kaiser posted most of his men downstairs to cover the entrance while he remained upstairs, his most trusted men in close company. For the time being, he lingered in a corner of Gibson's office twirling a thick gold coin up and over his fingers. His men stood post just outside the office. He listened in on what sort of plan Justin was formulating with Gibson.<p>

Justin and Gibson were both standing behind his wide desk. Gibson turned on his desk-mounted monitor and woke up the CCTV surveillance program. They watched the various sectors of the city for undead activity. Nothing much was happening. No new developments. He pressed the channel select upwards, reaching the limit. Tired of waiting for the camera network to auto-cycle, he progressed around the smaller parts of the city via the sub-channel select. Now, instead of broad courtyards and factory floors, the view was of bathrooms, sleeping quarters, mess halls, and the underground facilities. The view was getting stranger the longer Justin watched: the city was barren. Every room. Every hallway. Even the courtyard.

Nothing.

No bodies, no hordes of zombies chasing down crazed workers. No parasites assimilating new hosts. And rarely any evidence of a city-wide massacre, except for spent brass casings and the occasional smear of blood on a wall.

Nothing.

This was because most of the carnage had been displaced.

He continued to cycle through the CCTV network feverishly, the range of channels nearly reaching the end before they would start over again at camera one. He would find something. He tapped the button like the antediluvian technician at an old telegraph repeater station. His must've gone through four dozen channels by now, his index finger fatigued and heavy. And then, he finally saw it.

Gibson nearly gasped.

A dozen zombies were in one of the factory's sub complexes, carrying mangled bodies and chunks of flesh, piling them into a corner of the room. He simply watched in horror and amazement as they went to workâ€"which was probably the most frightening aspect of what he was witnessingâ€"their work: they leisurely stacked the decaying bits of flesh as if it was their most enjoyable pastime, slowly and gracefully carrying on. It was their new home.

"What do you make of all this?" Gibson said, gesturing toward monitor.

"Stockpiling food, maybe." Justin responded.

"Could beâ€|" Gibson trialed off. "Building up strength for the next assault?"

"I don't think they're going anywhere."

"You think they'll stay in City Seventeen?" Gibson asked warily.

"More than likely. There seems to be a great deal of zombies concentrated right here, and the absence of zombies everywhere else says that they've reached some sort of equilibrium. It's like they just suddenly settled in as if they're gonna stay."

"What makes you so certain?"

"If they were hungry for more, they would've moved out by now. They don't tire at all from what I've seen. They could easily move upon other cities, but they haven't as far as I can tell."

"That's not good news for us."

"No shit."

"So then we're stuck riding this one out, eh? Well, this structure is the most capable." Gibson finished with the kind of desperate laugh that most people would find reason to ridicule.

"Have you called for help?"

"Help? You mean from THI?"

"Yeah. The big wigs in orbit."

"No."

"_No_?"

"I mean...no...I didn't contact them...because the long-haul communications circuits are out. That's why."

Justin cut directly to the point. "How much food is in here?"

"For as many people as we have? I'd say about five days, give or take."

"Then let's hope we don't get greedy."

"God help us all."

Justin scoffed and walked away.

That left Gibson alone with Kaiser Sergei.

Gibson's adrenaline spiked. He thought about calling Justin back. He longed for his protective, reassuring presence, but he suppressed that instinct. Instead, the admin remained in testament to his own hearty confidence. He pursed his lips as the Kaiser met his eyes. He kept rolling that coin in between his knuckles the whole time. "Mind if I have one of your cigars?" he asked with a strange arc of his brow.

Gibson kept a steady eye on Sergei, watched him glance about the room

and inspect his possessions. There was no way Sergei couldn't have felt his uneasy eyes darting all over the place as he followed the gaze, everywhere it roamed. "â€|I don't mind."

The Kaiser shot up, smiling as he neared the desk and reached into a box made of Spanish cedar. An apparatus below it injected vapor upwards, perfectly calibrated to give off just the right amount of humidity for the rare leaves inside. The Kaiser reached in, grabbed a cigar and brought it to bear in front of his nostrils for a deep, savory whiff. His eyes squinted in delight. "Tell me this isn't from Draco III."

"It is."

Sergei produced his lighter, started on the incredibly rare cigar and then instantly began pacing around the room as if a feline bereft of an attention span. He finally came to rest in front of a Cherrywood curio. The entirety of inside paneling was mirrored, reflecting lavish crystal adornments that attested to the glittering pride this admin must've felt for his city and all its accomplishments.

"My, my, you people know how to live well. I always appreciated the finer things. You know, the little comforts."

Sergei looked down at the matching, glass-topped Cherrywood coffee table in the middle of the room with a Sterling silver serving platter resting atop. It gleamed softly in the light. Varieties of imported danish and pastries glistened a rivaling amount. "You won't mind if a famished man steals a few bites." Sergei stated flatly. Without waiting for response, he bent down and set his slow-burning cigar on the table, ashes and all, instantly grabbing a fistful of food from the tray. He stuffed his mouth with two or three, eyes closed and savoring the flavor. "I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat if not for my distaste of THI and their administrators. I believe happiness comes in small doses. Don't you agree?"

Gibson reluctantly met Kaiser Sergei's animalistic stare. "I've always believed in the motto 'Work hard, play hard.'"

The Kaiser scooped up his cigar from the Cherrywood and took a slow drag, smiling contently. He then stepped closer to Gibson, uncomfortably close. "Have you worked hard?"

* * *

><p>"I can't see anything with all this fog." Hendricksson grimaced.<p>

"We'll have to wait until daybreak to see anything." Ken said. "That's just the way it is around here."

'So is that the fault of the factories here? Or is it because this planet is so damned cold?"

"â€|Both."

Joe took a seat on the tarred and shingled roof. "I never got to thank you guys for looking after me. I'd probably be dead right now. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Bill said, his deep voice carrying on into the foggy cold.

"I wonder how the others are getting along." Joe said.

* * *

><p>Gibson backed away. "I don't want any trouble with you. There's enough of it out there."<p>

"Really? You know, normally I would believe that but something seems kind of off to me...Call it instinct."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What were you and Reid talking about? Tell me, what cards are up your sleeve?"

"We were just trying to find out where the zombies are gathering up strength. We're trying to either mount an offensive or choke them off. I'm just trying to make it through this like you."

The Kaiser chuckled. "Survival." His laugh made Gibson shudder inside. "Have you been surviving well in here?" Sergei glanced rearward to Gibson's private stock of aged alcohol. "Have the years been as harsh to you as they have to me?"

"I've been holding up."

Sergei raised his brow. "Clearly. So do you think you will survive better than any particular person in here tonight?"

"I _don't _have any idea what you're talking about."

"Surely you have some opinion of this new, uncouth alliance Justin's built. I wonder how long and how well it will serve him, and you."

Gibson's eye contact with Sergei momentarily faltered as he searched for a level-headed response. He ran a hand over his buzzed head of hair, the scalp now glistening in the light of his well-adorned office space.

"It will be interesting to see how well we all aid one another in our days together."

"Now there you go!" Sergei grinned and clapped once. "Beautiful, choosing your words carefully. Spoken like a true politician." Sergei's smile evaporated, just the striking, black eyes now his defining feature. "But the playing field is level now, isn't it? These creatures are the debacle of some, and yet a Godsend to others. If I weren't so scared I'd have the mind to go outside and thank them myself. They catalyzed my efforts, oh mighty Mayor of City Seventeen. And surely you knew a day like this would come. You'd look into the eye of common folk and finally see what you've done to the world. Turns out that person is me. Man, of all the people." the Kaiser gave a hearty grin again. "You know it's strange...I never thought I'd ever be here face to face with the administrator of City Seventeen, and sadly I cannot do justice upon this moment as I would've wished."

Gibson shuffled one of his feet back a mere pace in an attempt to mask his true intent: inching closer to the weapon stowed in the desk just aft of him. "Now, don't do anything you'll regret, Sergei. We're all in the same boat from here on out. Taking action against me because I'm the administrator won't do anyone a bit of good."

Sergei narrowed his eyes and nodded at the frightened man, contemplating. He stopped his advance and afforded the wide-eyed admin a little more breathing room. Eyeing the various command & control switches that took up the majority of real estate on Gibson's wide desk, he slowly rounded a plush chair, gently sinking. "Yes, because there's no telling who'll prove the most useful, right?"

Gibson took a deep breath and collected himself. He rounded the corner of the wide, Cherrywood slab, taking the seat on the other side of Kaiser Sergei. "That's exactly right, _Kaiser_."

"Good. I'm glad we were able to come to an understanding." Sergei took one more drag of the cigar and slowly exhaled, his gaze trained on Gibson like a predator studying escaped prey. He stood back up a moment later. On the way out, he mashed the lit embers of his cigar on the office's Black Walnut paneling. "We'll be in touch."

Kaiser Sergei casually strode across the office and left the room, wisps of smoke following him in his wake.

Gibson tracked Sergei's disappearance until he was completely out of sight. The admin then sighed deeply. He reached into one of the desk drawers and pulled out a bottle of single malt Scotch and a sipping glass, calmly pouring two fingers. Taking a nip, he glanced to the monitor anchored on the desk, gingerly setting the beverage down in front of it. Along the right edge of the screen lied various status indicators of a Pelican dropship in center view. Recent operations performed on the bird were completed. It was fueled and ready for flight. While everyone else was in the business of running and hiding, playing Hide & Seek inside the city and across the endless plains, Gibson was gearing up for a different sort of escape. With another satisfactory glance at the vessel, he silently thanked himself for shelling out the credit on the upgrades by finishing off his drink.

* * *

><p>Justin descended the stairs and found himself in the lobby floor again. He observed the room. And there, seated on one of the couches was Layla. Justin stood at ease. He could spend an hour just looking at her, the contours of her face resonating deep within his sense of longing for peace and serenity. Her presence on Traxus IX should not have been possible. She shouldn't be here, much like Chris.<p>

She was fair, beautiful. What force could've possibly brought her? A sick and twisted God, Justin surmised.

But that same God so deemed it that she be in Justin's life as wellâ€"a little slice of heaven for him. He was both thankful and ashamed at that.

She met his eyes and smiled. "How are you?"

"Fine." Justin said, rubbing the side of his head. "Hurts a little."

"I heard you took a good tumble. Glad you're okay."

"Yeah."

"I never got to thank you for saving me back there."

"You don't have to." Justin replied. "But it looked like you were doing just fine. You hosed them down pretty good with all that fire, you know."

"Yeah." she laughed. "Good old brute force. It never hurts to use it."

Justin smiled, "And a good roast is always nice."

They locked eyes in silence for a moment. And eternal moment, it seemed.

But something broke that blissful silence.

"Reid." Gibson said from the staircase.

The voice inside Justin's mind tickled his conscience. A low rumble. Justin wheeled around to see the administrator. The man was nervous. Beads of sweat clung to the skin of his widow's peaks, glistening bright in the threshold of the lobby.

"What is it?" Justin answered.

"I need to talk to you. Alone."

Justin looked back to her. "This will only take a minute. I'll be back. Yell if you need me."

Justin spun on a heel and followed the administrator back to the staircase.

* * *

><p>Sergei strolled down the hall of the second floor. A cigar in the corner of his mouth and a bottle of brandy in handâ€"taken from Gibson's private stockâ€"he was happy as a clam for the time being. Though he'd much rather be outside among his men, commanding his legion of criminal-soldiers, helping them take back the empire that was stolen from him so long ago. But there was no possibility of leaving the only shelter available. Far worse killers were on the loose.<p>

Satisfied that all of his most trusted men on the inside of this building would be safe, he decided to take a gander at the governing body of THI's cash crop. This was where the fabled admins and their staff resided. He'd never imagined stepping foot inside the great cities of the world until it was time to officially claim victory over the planet, THI included. He was here strictly on survival needs. Long ago, he chose a different line of work.

Down the hall, a closet door was openâ€”not the way it was earlier. He walked closer for inspection, stepped around and found a young boy standing there with his back to him.

"What are you doing?"

The startled young boy wheeled around. It was Chris.

"Just looking." he said.

"It's dangerous to be all alone."

Chris looked away and shrugged. "We're safe here."

"Not entirely." Sergei stepped closer.

Chris' eyes shot wide as the towering man's silhouette engulfed him. All the boy could do was cringe in horror.

But Sergei merely grabbed a hold of the door knob at Chris' side and gently nudged the boy away. "Better to leave things untouched around here." He closed the door and watched the boy return to normalcy upon his withdrawal. Sergei backpedaled two paces and looked Chris over. "I've been meaning to catch up with you alone."

Chris sighed and eased his stance. "You have?" He glimpsed beyond Sergei and down the hall where Justin and the administrator had emerged from the stairwell, just out of earshot. He saw Justin stopping mid-stride, looking dead at Sergei as Gibson gestured wildly into the air and carried on about something inaudible.

"Yes." he said while leaning his back up against the styrocrete, gazing at the ceiling. "Don't be frightened, child. I am the least of your fears." He took a generous swig of the Brandy, staring off into space.

Chris watched air bubbles race upwards inside the glass. After a hard swallow, Sergei's arm dropped back down to his side, the bottle clutched loosely in his hand.

"You know what you should be most afraid of, Chris?"

"The zombies."

"Your own decisions."

Confused, Chris tilted his head.

"You aren't tough enough to go it alone, so you must choose wisely who you'll place your trust in." Sergei corrected. "Your life depends on it. Whose lead will you follow? The preacher? The crooked administrator?"

"I trust Justin. That is who I follow."

"I see. A fine choice for the short term, but will you follow him into Hell? Because I believe that is where he's headed."

"You mean to kill all the zombies?"

"Yes, Hell."

"I think it's better than running and hiding while they get stronger for every minute we sit around."

The man took a drag of the cigar held in his other hand, the eyes losing focus for an instant behind an exhalation of lazy, curling smoke wafting upwards. Chris could tell this man already had a response in store, but for some reason chose to act it out with some present showing of contemplation.

"Normally, I'd agree with such a plan of attack, but we know nothing about these creatures."

"We know that bullets kill them."

"Granted, but we've only just begun to see what they're capable of. You're right about one thing. The longer we wait, the more numbers they will possess. And we've already wasted enough time. It's too far gone now, in my belief. They will move on, you know. To other cities...until they've encompassed the entire planet. Do you really want to stay around for that?"

Chris considered it for a moment, but what alternatives were there? City 17 was their home, was home to everyone here as were other cities around the globe to all others. It wasn't as if anyone could pack up their belongings, board a commercial transport and bail out to another colony. They were stuck. Beached on this far off island in the black ocean of deep-space. They couldn't leave even if the New Model Army allowed them to.

"No other option." Chris said firmly. "Fight to the death."

"If it comes to that."

Chris shrugged.

Sergei's eyes glimmered. "But what if it doesn't have to come to that?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if I told you there's a way off this rock?"

"I'd say you're lying."

"Oh?"

Chris narrowed his eyes. "Then why haven't you left yet?"

"Because I haven't acquired the golden ticket."

"What's the golden ticket?"

"The administrator's Pelican."

"No, that's not possible. You can't leave Traxus Nine in a Pelican."

"And why should it be impossible?" Sergei downed another swift gulp

of liquor, keeping a sidelong vigil on Chris.

"Well, how in the hell..." Chris stopped himself mid-thought.

Was he actually debating with the craziest man he'd heard about? Trading words with the worst of the worst? Most people believed he was the root cause of all the world's problems and Chris would certainly take Justin's word at face value, however cruel he seemed at times.

But the man in front was waiting for the rest of Chris' counter-argument, his brow raised, listening intently to what the young boy had to say. And even though the man appeared a shark at first glance, this was the most attention any grown-up had ever paid him. He glanced down the hall, beyond the broad shoulders of this man, searching for Justin. He was nowhere to be seen. After another close look at Sergei, Chris ultimately felt this encounter was of no real consequence to anyone whether this man was the most dangerous warlord or not.

It was just two survivors holed up in a box passing the time. Idle chat.

Chris relented and continued the conversation.

"Too many other variables."

"Such as?"

"First, how would you steal it?"

"Okay, second." Sergei smiled, appearing to have answers ready-made specifically for this occasion.

Chris resumed hesitantly, "...How would you get past the orbital patrols? They'll shoot anything down trying to escape."

"Third."

"Fine, where would you go? There's no colony for light-years in every direction."

"Anything else?"

"No, I guess not. But these are all very serious concerns."

"To answer your first question," Sergei began, "the administrator would willingly give that bird to us because he wants to survive as well, and he'd accommodate certain unsavory characters of the world to make sure of it, yours truly included. To answer your second question, we could easily avoid the orbital patrols because Gibson would be with us. Admin gets a little cabin fever and decides to go topside for a change in scenery. Sure, it'd be a little fishy, but who's gonna question an Admin? Lastly, we can surely make it a few light-years no problem. A little modification to the vessel is needed, that's all."

Again, he raised the bottle of Brandy with utter content outshining from his eyes, swallowing down another gulp, pressing his stare into

Chris as if to welcome a rebuke.

"Okay, all good answers and they seem plausible, but you still have a very critical hole in your argument."

"What?"

"Pelican's can't go faster than light."

"What if for us, they can?"

"How in the hell is a Pelican gonna go FTL?!" Chris nearly yelled, his mounting frustration now overt.

"Simple, my lad." Kaiser said, placing a hand on Chris' shoulder. "We have Gibson order a slipspace drive to retrofit into the Pelican."

Chris chuckled smartly and leaned back. "Assuming he could even get a slipspace drive, it would take weeks to arrive here by standard shipping lanes."

"And we could certainly last that long. City Seventeen has all the provisions we need until that shipment arrives. Hell, we could even loosen our belts a notch or two."

"We'd have to secure the entire city first, and that's _after_ we kill everything in it."

"Easily done when we work in cooperation."

Chris then crossed his arms. "We'd have to somehow modify the Pelican to house a slipspace drive."

"That's where Justin comes in."

"_Justin?_"

"Yeah, Justin."

"Sergei, I don't know how well you know him, or how well you _think_ you know him, but I'm pretty sure he could give a fuck less about what you're thinking of."

"C'mon, kid, surely he can see potential in this. And we all know he's handy with things."

"You're right about one thing. He's pretty resourceful. I'll give you that, but we're talking about an install normally done by a team of people that get paid to do these sorts of things for a living." Chris threw his arms up, trying to gesture futility of hope. "What makes you think we could do it?"

"You ever read Stream Traveler, kid?"

"No."

"Well, _I've_ read a few issues. Slipstream drives aren't that hard to install these days, you just gotta have the money and basic knowledge of electronics. Money's the hard part, but assuming we're a

team by now, Gibson could front it and make the transaction via his priority slip-space probe that I know all admins have. And slip-space drives are all modular now. Connect power to a good source, hook up a stable ground, and route a LASER-optimized fiber feed from the NAV computer to the drive and you're golden. Damn things do everything themselves. All you gotta do is have basic hand tools to fasten the damned thing down and you're ready to fly among the stars."

"Do you have any idea how long it would take to build a slipstream-capable Pelican with only one person? Justin wouldn't even know the answer to that!"

"As long as it takes. And besides, is Justin not capable of delegating work to others? We've got all the steel and fabrication equipment one could ask for. Look, it's our only way out, kid. You can throw as many roadblocks at me as you want, I'll just keep responding with work-arounds. I'm an optimist at heart, but even I can see Traxus Nine is done for. There's no more band-aids that are going to patch this up. This is huge. This will change everything. Hell, already has. These monsters have taken over and they've announced it quite overtly. Very soon, you will not recognize this world. It's finally time we all left this place and I'm not in the least emotionally tied down to this giant ball of shit. I don't know about you, but I have a pretty good feeling you're just like me."

For the sake of pure conjecture, stemming from the fact that he'd been bored out of his mind prior to this talk, Chris humored Sergei's plan. He thought about it heavily. It was ambitious, risky, crazy, but there was the chance it could actually work. If it was realized, the payout was big. One thing Chris knew for sure: it was an all-or-nothing endeavor. The one question lingering in his mind was...

Would everyone be able to work together?

* * *

><p>Justin followed Gibson's lead up a short flight of steps to the second floor. He wished Gibson would have left him just a little more time there in the lobby. Once Layla was on his mind, he needed more of her. The abrupt change was a nuisance that Justin couldn't find a culprit for. Maybe it was his own plight; he needed relief and surely Layla was his only cure. Maybe it was the plight of Gibson's helplessness, the shared plight of everyone here, everyone weighing him down like baggage. The plight of the whole, helpless world.<p>

The two stepped across the hall and made their way towards Gibson's office for another sort of impromptu meeting. Before they entered, Justin caught sight of Sergei further down the hall conversing with Chris, just barely out of voice range. His cohorts weren't too far away either, eyeing Justin cunningly, the goons keen to ensure the Kaiser had no uninvited guests. Justin began to move towards them, but he was halted by a firm hand from Gibson. He looked back at the admin and glared.

"Please, Justin. This is more important than the boy." The admin very briefly made eye contact down the hall with Sergei before stepping into his office. Justin played nice, took his attention off of the

Kaiser and followed Gibson inside.

"Please close the door behind you."

The Ex-Marine sat down in a chair directly in front of Gibson's desk while the owner of the office and city chose to perch himself atop its wide surface.

The fat tissue of Gibson's thighs overhung the edge of the hard wood a slight amount as he brought his hands to his lap with interlocked fingers. "I feel like we're clutching at straws here. What sort of plan have you got?"

"Isn't it obvious? When our food and water runs out, we're gonna need to look for more."

"It's gonna be a lot more dangerous out there now with those things running around unchecked, especially with none of you having any ammunition."

"That's a risk we'll be forced to take."

"And more still?"

"Like what, no cigars and brandy anymore?"

"Like Kaiser Sergei tagging along with us. The man wants to kill me, Reid. I'm afraid for my life." Gibson ran both hands over his glistening scalp.

"I'll keep him off your back."

"That's not very much reassurance. I'm arguably the most hated man on the planet. His minions will probably take a stab at me before he does."

"True, but it's in his interest not to kill you unless he's positive you're of no more use to him. And he's got a tight hold over his men, too. Trust me on that."

Gibson sighed. Excess tissue over his sternum began to droop as if to accessorize the frown on his face. "All the same, we can't just pack up and take our show on the road with him in company."

"He wouldn't be stupid enough to try something. The more survivors, the better. He knows that. We just need more supplies and more mobility to keep hopes up. We need to be able to move around the city freely, especially to the dining facility. We need to secure that area or else we won't even be able to sustain our own bodies. And most importantly," Justin finished with uncharacteristic urgency in his voice, "we need ammo."

"You're preaching to the choir. Look, I can help us do all that. I have the blueprints that no one else knows about. I know shortcuts and I know where items of interest are. We can make this happen. But I need your word that you'll keep an eye on me."

"Fine. But now I want something from you."

"Name it."

"Your Pelican."

"You're crazy. That's company property, not mine."

"Does that really matter now? We've been invaded by an alien force that doesn't care about death. It just wants to turn every person into one of them. To be able to move around by air is about the best thing we could leverage in our favor."

"You're right."

"Good. As soon as we get our act together, get food and water and more firepower, we're gonna make a break for your Pelican so we can get the fuck out of City Seventeen."

Justin sat back in the chair and marveled at the simplicity of his plan. Simple was good. Simple invited very little complications. He was confident they would once again have the upper hand against the growing alien threat. Once that was settled, he would then begin to deal with the prospect of handling Kaiser Sergei. All in all, it was solid.

â€|But Gibson didn't seem to think so. His face was wracked with worry as Justin sank deeper in the plush leather.

"What's wrong with the plan?" Justin asked.

Gibson was somewhere else in his mind, unresponsive.

A moment later: "Nothing's wrong." he said. "Your argument is sound. We'll leave in four days. This way, we can take our last rations with us in case we encounter delays."

"Are you sure? You had a strange look just then. We're gonna need one-hundred percent cooperation from each other. If you have a concern, you need to tell me."

"No, n-no concerns. It's the best option I've heard so far."

"Gibson, where's your staff at? I haven't seen anyone else."

"Sent them all on errands right before those things showed up."

"Got any tabs on them?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"I see."

"All I can do is hope they're surviving."

"Okay, that's that. I'm going back downstairs."

Justin got up and walked out the door with not even the slightest notion in his mind that Gibson was holding something back. Perhaps he trusted the admin too much.

* * *

><p>"Why are you telling me about all this?" Chris asked.<p>

"Because you're still innocent." Sergei said. "Justin and the others, I have to watch out for. Gibson especially. It's all politics with people like him. He'll discredit others just to credit himself, like status and reputation actually still means anything in this forsaken world. Gibson is so ate up about being an administrator it's disgusting. He's a pure company man. He's in bed with the Traxus Heavy Industries and cares for nothing more than quarterly profits, c_certainly_ hates _me_. I can't tell him about my plan, no, he'd shoot it down simply because of who I am. I can't tell Justin either because he obviously wants to suicide-charge these creatures head-on. And the others are worthless."

"You mean Ken, Bill and Hendricksson?"

"Yes. Everyone here is so set in their own ways that they couldn't _possibly_ hear me out. They're blinded by convictions that have miraculously gotten them through life. You've got the preacher living with his eyes closed, who only sees the good in things even if it means his life. Then you've got some down-on-his-luck soldier who is loyal to some code of honor that no one but him abides by. And then there is Ken, who is too afraid to even know _what _he believesâ€|

"Whereas _you_â€|you will listen to reason just like you are listening to me right now. You're still young and unbiased, and can actually look at this situation objectively."

Chris felt his blood temperature rise a degree. Sergei had everyone figured out.

"How can you possibly know all this? You haven't even known us for two hours."

"Because I know people, boy."

"Or you know how to manipulate."

"Sometimes manipulation is the very definition of survival."

Chris glared up at him.

"â€|Is it really so hard to believe? Governments have been doing it for _centuries_. People do it everyday. If you can honestly look back on your life from this moment and tell me you've never socially engineered your way to betterment, then I will speak no more of this matter ever again. That's what I thought. Being human means struggling for one's own power. It is taken from you and you take it back again and again. You have not experienced much yet, so it is hard to take in. Your surroundings are not black and white." Sergei chuckled. "And surely you know by now that THI is an evil corporation. Need I express my beliefs any further? I genuinely dislike talking down to kids."

Chris' mouth dropped. Every preconception he had of this villain was starting to lose substance. Everything Justin and the others had engrained into Chris' understanding of Sergei was eroding away. He

was at a pure loss for words, Sergei clearly having the intellectual upper hand. Chris suddenly realized he was way out of his league. Justin would say something to the tune of _Just turn away and don't look back, _if he were here. But Justin wasn't here, and Chris was transfixed on Sergei's ability to reason with him rationally. He was making more sense than anyone Chris had encountered so far. It wasn't hard to see what he was driving at. In fact, it was easy.

"Look Chris," he resumed, "you seem like a smart guy. You've survived this long. You know a thing or two about your surroundings and how to keep a cool head. Don't lose those qualities now, it's your meal ticket. Think about this carefully. If you want to go risking your life killing those creatures, you go right ahead and follow Justin to that end. I'm sure you'll be fine in his capable hands. But you'd have to be the fool of the cosmos not to seize the unique opportunity in front of us! We can actually use these parasites as an excuse to leave this place. With the right words, this loathsome administrator can be convinced that there is no victory to be had on this planet anymore. There'll be no more money because we'll all be dead. He'll understand it better if you put it in his terms. What has transpired here in the last few hours alone should be reason enough for him to at least consider. But like I said, people like him are set in their own ways. We have to break them all of their indoctrinated logic. But Justin is the key; start with Justin. If we turn him, we turn Gibson. If you can help me accomplish this, not only will we survive this infestation, we'll be off Traxus Nine too. Consider _me_ your long-term investment. Just give me a chance, and I promise you we'll be laughing about this whole thing on some tropical island with bikini-clad women feeding us grapes and massaging our tallywhacks. But it is all up to you. You are the lynchpin of this plan, the only sane plan put on the table so far."

"So you want me to be the delivery boy."

"Yes. They will listen to you."

"You think I'm young and gullible."

"No, no, _no_. You've got to undo what everyone else has told you about me. I'm not the bad guy in this situation. Has anything I've said to you seemed deceitful? Malicious? Or does it seem worthwhile? I am not trying to swindle you, Chris. If that were my intent, I'd be turning you against everyone. And a guy like you would be smart enough to see through that right away. I'm simply putting forth ideas on how to not only _survive_, but on how to get the hell _off_ this ghost planet. No one is putting a gun to your head. That's not the way people should work together. Seriously, take your time and think about this idea. When you're ready, start putting it out there. Just don't let any of them associate my name with it or it'll just wind up being a lost cause."

"I know about your past, you know. I know what you've done."

"You think you know about me? You have a fraction of an idea. You've got their side of the story and that's fine, but let me tell you, boy..._no_ one is innocent. We're all just rats in the same cage both here _and_ out there. We prosper any which way we can, yes? _That_, _Chris_, is where our innocence lies. You see, like you I was dealt a lousy hand from the beginning."

Chris felt his jaw go slack again, but he kept his cool and kept a straight face.

This man, this _Kaiser, _was far more adept at reading people than he was. Chris couldn't come up with words to say, simply for the fact that he was in total agreement with nearly everything spoken thus far. The rationale of this plan was compelling, but now there was something more. Something Chris could never have seen or felt prior to this conversation. He had a piece of Sergei's past now. A similarity, a common trait.

He was now, to at least some small degree, sympathetic to both the man and the plan. Chris didn't want to readily agree with him, thoughâ€”fearing it would appear as though he'd concede defeat in such an argument (and it was an argument), but listening to Sergei was beginning to feel more right than wrong. The only thing strange to the boy at this point was the fact that Sergei had turned his opinions so quickly.

Chris stared at him momentarily. Sergei's face was level and true.

The boy nodded and slowly turned away.

At the threshold to the stairwell, he looked back and regarded Kaiser Sergei one last time before descending. He still wasn't entirely sure if it was wise to pay mind to him, however genuine he appeared. Foregoing the fact that he just traded wits with the most dangerous man he'd ever heard of, he knew the idea could work if only everyone else could see the logic in it. But even if there was consensus, this meant everyone had to be in cooperation with one another as they put together the nuts and bolts of such an operation. That was asking a lot. Bad blood had accumulated over the years.

After another moment's thought, Chris went downstairs to the lobby to get some food.

He had a lot to think about now.

25. Rising Inevitabilities

**Rising Inevitabilities**

It was a strange feeling being able to wind down after such stress had mounted. For many of the survivors inside the admin building, it didn't even seem right, like a priveledge previously denied by a higher, unquestionable authority.

The past few days were what some could only describe as a journey through slipspaceâ€”time dilation, traveling so far and so fast without any reference. So much happened in such a short time span.

The zombie plague started out in Justin's igloo, which had already claimed one casualty: Pete. And on the other side of the spectrum was Kaiser Sergei. His loyalist army was out there ravaging the world yet again at his bidding, scouring the lands for all enemies known and suspected. There was also the looming prospect that all of them would soon be dealing with a new threat of alien infestation. All told,

they might very well walk into a total nightmare in the open plains if they survived long enough to break free of City 17. And the factory district of that very city was arguably now the focal point of the zombie manifestation itself, no longer the heater room of Justin's igloo. The parasites actually caught up with Justin, their insatiable hunger for flesh propelling them all the way across the open plains. They didn't tire through the journey. They reached the city at a marathon runner's pace, infiltrating it with ease. They claimed victims with God speed.

A larger, renewed parasite collective emerged.

It metastasized.

It took time for it to sink in, but eventually everyone reflected on the horrors that transpired once the fatigue and confusion finally settled. Nothing could have prepared anyone for what happened, the blood and the gore and the shock that blitzed the factory. So fast and so merciless the parasite struck. So many people—co-workers they had shared a conveyor belt or a sleeping room with—now gone. Once casual acquaintances, now nothing more than violent, carnivorous creatures was what became of them. Compounding the living's strife and fear was the fact that they had no idea how much the creatures could multiply now that they had a limitless selection of hosts and no boundaries. Consequently, no one could ever know how far they'd reach.

All those inside the admin building were thankful to be alive, yet wholly morose. Most of the group attempted nothing except existing and coping. Much of the time spent in preparation for Justin's next mission to come was not spent doing anything, at least nothing utilitarian or of any real benefit to collective survival. The activities of the last few days inside admin consisted of people centering themselves and reflecting on events passed, of eating, drinking, of basic self-preservation. A giant, primitive reset button had been pushed by the events of days passed, driving much of those still alive into a dark corner in their mind, dark and safe. Underlying the horrific memories of the factory incident was a wealth of new information, some it beneficial and some it not so encouraging, nevertheless a lot to process—too much for some. Ultimately, whether anyone other than Justin was capable enough to do it, the only thing left was to focus on a new plan now that they lingered in total safety. A plan to carry them over into the next, successive plan. The prospect of dragging on and resisting the fate of a creeping death seemed hopeless to some. Then again, they now had the time for foolish emotional pastime. There was no ammunition to distribute, no armor to don, no pre-battle rituals to enact, nothing to steel them over or incite hope. Nevertheless, tedium was irrelevant. Everyone was now sync'd with Justin's clock.

Only a few among the group faced the fact that food and water supplies were dwindling every hour, every day. And for others, there was nothing to keep them wholly occupied. Patience was at the brink of running thin. A pair of cliques had formed since things had calmed: Justin and those with him—to which Gibson readily clung to; and the Kaiser and his men. Allies of each side banded together, reinforcing the general air of segregation throughout the building.

Very few prospects remained: die here, or die outside with a fight. A

slow, bitter death either way...and an unknown conclusion once assimilated into the stalking alien collective.

But if they made it past the administrative district and inside of the resource-rich city, survival had a chance of longevity. More time was available. More plans could be formed, crutches to bolster their efforts from day to day.

This was the basis of Justin's new proposal to the rest of the group, though no real consensus formed on what should happen thereafter. The fact that the creatures outside had expanded their locus of control left the humans with severely-crippled options. There was little to no recovery from another run in with the zombies, unless absolutely every plan from here on out resulted in success. Survival rested on a knife's edge—sanity too, for that matter. Nevertheless, the ex-commander was trying to think beyond current plights in order to circumvent all the odds stacked against them. Highly experienced in conflict, Justin knew those odds would only compound with the passing of time. A choice had to be made this day: get busy living or get busy dying.

He felt he'd given good rationale for the plan, but failed yet again to smooth it over, failed to provide the comforting vibe that everything would be alright. For there was far more complexity in the plan than Justin had mentioned. Once in the city, they'd have to assess the entry points to make sure they'd hold up against the extraordinary strength the creatures possessed. Obviously, the main gate hadn't held their tide, which resulted in a large influx of the smaller parasitic variety into the city—ultimately what had enlarged their masses. Justin tried to not picture what took place a few days ago—“all the workers being devoured outside the break room, how fast they changed, how quickly and decisively their lives were extinguished. But whether the zombies overpowered the guards and gained unforced access or if they overpowered the mighty gate of Titanium mesh, it was a total shot in the dark at guessing which. Maybe the guards found escape.

Too many variables to process.

But going back inside was voted the only option despite Justin's cool line of logic and how pointedly it influenced the majority. There was nothing outside for many miles, Justin had argued. Nothing but the barren wasteland of Traxus IX for the vast stretches between the citadels of the THI. They had no reliable transportation. They were stuck. And the supplies and sustenance inside admin were indeed at critical levels. If they survived the journey inwards, they'd all be rewarded with everything they needed to survive with for an indefinite amount of time. Justin had pointed out during steady-state operations, the city had the capability to provide all basic health, nourishment and sanitation needs for more than 500 people. Certainly, 10 could last quite a while if they were smart and rationed things out. But it was air power that Justin was after. To him, it was key. It ensured strategic advantage and a broader perspective of the battlefield. Gibson's company transport, the Pelican.

His only perceived challenge was surviving long enough to acquire it.

Justin began to think about all the variables from now until then: ones he knew of for certain, others he wouldn't normally expect. He

weighted all of them over many other variables existing inside the group he was leading, for they also had profound effectsâ€”an impact to each person's sanity, stamina, health and cooperation. Taking no unnecessary risks; maintaining an air of confidence to keep control of this volatile lot; most importantly, maintaining an unpredictable course of action to his enemies, both undead and still alive. It was all part of commandâ€”something he tried to forget all these years. He'd been suddenly thrown back into the role. He lit a cigarette and savored the first smoky drag.

During the tail end of Justin's ruminations, Chris entered the lobby from the staircase with a plate full of food in one hand and a pair of water bottles grasped tightly in the other. He made for one of the couches and found Justin deep in thought in a nearby chair. Reid stared blankly ahead into one of the windows, staring at the cold and inhospitable night. Justin glanced his way, but as soon as he registered Chris' presence he immediately panned away, going back to thinking again.

"I've got some good eats here. You hungry?" Chris asked.

"No." Justin answered flatly.

Chris knew better by now than to press further and thusly turned away.

Chris suddenly stopped, pivoted back again. Time was running low, and this was the eve of their next big mission. He felt the pressure, the need to deliver Sergei's own plan. Whether it originated from the most immoral and untrustworthy man in known existence was immaterial; it could save them all. And while this reasoning was paramount to escape, Chris also yearned for Justin's approval. For Chris to be deemed worthy and even admirable in Justin's eyes...

Chris had the rehearsed words on the tip of his tongue. The boy was about to speak when he suddenly remembered all the times Justin had been angered by the simple sound of his voice. He remembered the sting on his mouth the day Justin hit him. Chris turned away and left the former combatant commander to his own devices, hoping he'd get his chance with him soon.

* * *

><p>Chris wandered around aimlessly about the admin buildingâ€”strolling to the end of a hallway to get a thoughtful gaze out of one, barred window. Up a flight of stairs for more of the same, until he traversed nearly every square foot of the structure. He glanced down the hallway of the second floor: barely out of earshot was Layla, Joe and Ken, all sitting Indian style over the slate-colored shag carpet. He took a few steps in their direction, his boredom beginning to overwhelm.<p>

Eye contact was coincidentally made with Layla first. She lifted her gaze from the spread of playing cards in her small, adjoined hands and smiled as Chris neared. "Hey," she greeted cheerfully, "wanna join us?"

Chris hovered over the trio and craned his neck around. "Whatchu playing?"

"Five card draw, my favorite." her eyes beamed back.

"Nah...I think I'll pass. I only gamble with my life these days, not my money. I might just go downstairs for food or something. I gotta find some way to shake these jitters."

"You alright?" she set her cards face down on the carpet in front of her shins. It was then that Joe and Ken regarded Chris with concern.

"Yeah, I'm hangin' in there." Chris sighed. "Just ready to leave this place and finally get outside. I need some fresh air."

"Well, you certainly ain't dying to get outside for the sunshine."

Joe and Ken laughed.

"Yeah," she added, contently sighing and scooping up her cards and fanning them out again, "I think we all need fresh air and a change."

"Have a good game, ya'll. Good one, by the way, Layla."

"Wanna come back later?" she said with eyes fixed on her best cards. "We'll deal you in." she coaxed. "Take your mind off things."

"Maybe. We'll see."

Chris left the three and made for the stairwell again, but instead of going downstairs like he said, he glanced upwards. He knew Bill was somewhere above; he knew Justin was downward. He had already seen Justin and most certainly dismissed the thought of troubling him again. He proceeded higher. After another round of laborious climbing step after step, he eventually found Bill not too far from the third floor landing. He was reciting a prayer, kneeling down and facing a wall. He kissed a rosary and spoke softly. He seemed at total peace. From what Chris gathered, Bill did this regularly. He did it religiously.

Bill's tranquility was always so contagious to Chris, and though he always found Bill's rituals soothing, Chris found it unnatural given what was inevitably to come. He waited for Bill to finish.

The priest stood slowly and fluidly turned with a grace expectant of a saint. He regarded Chris with a steady, even gaze.

"How do you keep so centered all the time?"

"Like anything," Bill smiled, "with practice. I know what everyone is going through and I respect that everyone has a particular way in which they'd like to live their own life at any given moment, but is there any use for despair at a time like this? Isn't the only certainty left faith?"

"You are right, but it's time that wears us down. It's natural for the mind to fabricate fear, I think. It's like nature's way of preparing us for the unexpected. It's the mind generating abstractions, giving us new perspective even though we hate the

possibility of it."

"I admire your intelligence and your insight. Such a smart boy for such a young age. You appear fragile to some, but in reality you are wise beyond your years. For your sake, take solace in that fact. Trust your instincts."

"Bill, do you think Justin respects me as an equal yet?"

"I would think so. Why do you ask?" Bill brushed the dust off his knees.

"It's harder than ever just to talk to him."

Bill spoke calmer now, his voice deepening. "Like I've said, he's just very set in his own ways. And now we have so much turmoil at hand. Give him more time."

"Time we don't have, Bill. I have an idea that is so great that maybe no one will understand it, and I fear it won't be heard until we're all dead."

"You can tell me."

Chris glanced either way down the hallway. "We have Gibson order a slipspace drive. We fortify the city and wait until the parts arrive. When they drop, we shoehorn the drive into his Pelican. It's a lengthy operation, but within the safety of the city we have all the food and water we'll need. All we have to do is wait and keep a tight vigil over the city."

"That'sâ€|amazing! Simple, safe, brilliant! Did you think of this all on your own?"

"â€|Yes."

"Now, I'm no expert on anything, but who is qualified to do all that work? Who will make it happen?"

"Justin."

Bill's posture slackened. He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes at the young lad.

"Justin is probably no expert," Chris added, "but with everyone working in cooperation, surely we could figure it out. _Think _about it, Bill. We could actually leave this place."

"Hmm, I don't know, Chris. We'd be leaving a lot of good-hearted people behind, just leaving them to fend for themselves. I couldn't do that in good conscience. Not with so much wrong. Could you?"

"Bill, it's a lost cause and you know that. Please, don't stay here. I don't think I could leave without you."

"You're talking like you're already leaving, and you haven't told anyone this plan but me."

Chris sighed. "You're right. I'm working on it, though. But please,

Bill, think about it. You shouldn't stay here. It's so dangerous now. You could die."

"Even if we were to leave here, there would still be danger. Death stalks us all anywhere we go, it's just a matter of time running out. When you accept that, you'll be more at peace."

"I can't, okay? I have too much to do. I want a life again. I'm going to escape."

Bill smiled softly upon the boy and gaited closer. He placed a hand down on Chris' shoulder. "Then you know your path. Don't be saddened that ours may not cross again. You've been my friend and I have been yours, and you can always remember that wherever you go."

Chris bowed his head to the floor and clenched his jaw. "Why, Bill? Why is that everyday there's a new reason to cry?"

Before Chris' tears flowed, Joe and Ken emerged from the stairwell.

"Hey," Joe said, "wanna go up to the roof again? I'm getting sick of these walls."

"I'll pass." Bill said. "I caught a nasty chill last time, but thanks."

"How about you, Chris?"

"No thanks. I've got some business to attend to."

"Suit yourself."

* * *

><p>It was now the dead of night. Justin was headed to the lobby after a long day of planning and contemplating. He had been low on sleep and all he wanted was just that.<p>

"_Reid," _blared Gibson's voice over the facility PA, "_I need you in my office right now."_

Justin sighed and fought the impulse to kick over the coffee table that had been acting as his impromptu footrest.

The voice overhead sounded calm, but it was just a mask over the vibe of fear that Justin sensed from the loudspeaker. Then again, Gibson had sprung a leak ever since Sergei showed up to this location. The administrator was on perpetual edge, ever keen to denote the fear for his own life to Justin. And even though Justin eventually tuned out Gibson's incessant cries for help while somehow simultaneously reassuring them during recent days, he knew the man was rightfully paranoid. _He ought to be_, Justin mused as he got up from his resting place.

Kaiser Sergei or any of his men could kill him any time they wanted to. The only thing standing in the way of them doing just that, Justin suspected, was the fact that Gibson was still of some use. He still was to Justin. For one, Justin needed the admin's Pelican. Sergei also wanted it, and his minions needed to survive long enough

to do whatever it was they wanted to doâ€”acquire supplies from City 17's stockyard and strike out to where the criminal armies were marching, which also meant Justin was inexorably marked for death once the deal was finalized.

Justin would certainly be of no more use once the leader of the criminal underworld had everything he needed to sustain his war. The ex-Marine was now undoubtedly viewed as no more than a double-crosser to them. A man without _any _code.

All Justin knew for the moment was that he had to be extra vigilant once they actually reached the stockyardâ€”ifâ€”they reached the stockyard.

This train of thought kept him halfway occupied as he rose, yet again up the staircase to Gibson's office. He was starting to get agitated by the constant climbing and descending, his shins throbbing from all the impact. It would be at least one thing off his mind when it finally came time to leave the admin district. He retrieved a cigarette from his breast pocket as he cleared the last step. A few paces forward and he strolled into Gibson's office. The admin hovering over his desk didn't take his eye off the monitor as Justin entered the room.

"Come'ere, Reid. You need to look at this."

On the way in, a glitter of light-glare caught Justin's eye. Gibson's private stock was just a few paces off to the left, a Cherrywood curio with mirror-paneled accents on the outside and spotless glass shelving on the inside.

There were dozens of unique liquors crowded together, everything halogen-backlit. The casks that some of the drinks were aged in prior to bottling had no doubt infused tempting qualities in them, perhaps earthy flavors that ushered the beverage down smoothly. Justin's lips pursed and his mouth watered at the thought. And it just so happened that somewhere at the rear of all the crowding was the unmistakable, extremely-rare container he could have sworn was extinct. He could see it's unmistakable profile peeking over a trio of other savory brands. The genuine label adhered to it was proof-positive that it was in fact Alt Burgundy. Justin never thought he'd see one in his lifetime. Jericho VII was the sole producer of the beverage. The planet fell to the Covenant in 2535.

"What is it now, Gibson, more bugs?"

"Just come here and look."

Justin took his time as he rounded the desk, taking a spot by Gibson's side. Before he even loaned attention to the display, he slowly lit up. After the first drag, he stowed the lighter back in his pocket while taking another glance at the fine spirits in Gibson's collection, then noticed Gibson staring at him impatiently. Justin rolled his eyes at the man and relented, squinting at the display. After about ten seconds of half-hearted scrutiny, Justin asked, "Where'd they all go?"

"That's what the problem is. I don't know."

"I see one or two still there. Where'd their buddies go? They go on

another hunt?"

Gibson leaned closer to him with wide, bloodshot eyes. "I don't _know_."

Justin slowly recoiled. "When's the last time you got any sleep?"

Gibson didn't answer.

"Okay, just do a rewind on the footage and let me see for myself."

"No, it's of no use now. Too much time has gone by. God Damn it! I should've watched these cameras every minute of every day instead of fucking around with you all."

Justin withdrew the cigarette from his mouth. "Seems as though you've watched too much as it is."

Gibson waved Justin off.

"Look, this could mean any number of things, so don't go crazy over it. We'll just have to be extra careful."

"Extra _careful?_ Reid, this is bad. We have no intel now, nothing to base our decisions on. You of all people know that zero situational awareness means no-go. We have to wait until we know what, and how many of that what is still out there."

"Screw waiting." Justin stood taller. "We'll be dead before we know what's going on. This is an animal we know very little about. Their movement patterns aren't the only thing we should be basing our decisions on, okay? We'll just have to take our chances. You know that we leave at dawn. You got the memo, right?"

Justin rounded the desk and proceeded to the door.

"Okay." Gibson said with a plea in his eyes. "But don't leave just yet. Stay here, I've been doing some researching..."

The admin began frantically typing in commands on the keyboard. Justin returned back behind the desk. He looked on the monitor again, saw that the man had about a dozen applications running simultaneously.

"You have been busy."

"Now is not the time for jokes, Reid, I assure you." Gibson typed another series of swift keystrokes, finishing with a hard tap on the ENTER button.

"Well, don't break the damned keyboard."

"Look at this roster here. This shows all the people in City Seventeen when those creatures showed up. Now, it only accounts for the people working the line at the time, so we don't know exactly who was here, but now look at this screen..." Gibson pointed to another quadrant within the wide display. "I have still frames taken from the live video feed when it happened. I went through all their faces and

names and referenced it to what's populated in the roster. They don't all match up, Reid."

"What, are you saying that some of them escaped?"

"Maybe," Gibson began to bite a fingernail, zoning out on some part of the screen in particular, "but what I'm concerned about is that we don't know exactly how many zombies we're dealing with. With the amount of uncertainty in the data I've compiled, there could be _a lot _more than we saw heading to sub-complex C."

"But we went through each camera, each sector of the city."

"There's some sectors that aren't under surveillance."

"I thought the whole damned place was wired."

"That's just what we tell people, Reid. There's more dark fiber than you can imagine. Not every sector was meant to be monitored."

"Why? I thought you admins like to keep tabs on everything in your stable."

"Yes, but anything I monitor has the chance to be monitored by others as well."

"Like your higher-ups?" Justin smirked.

"Among others, yes."

"There's more to this. Keep going."

"There's _their _operations and then there's _my _operations. And I don't just work for salary and benefits. I've taken my own liberties during my time here. I've got my own investments just like anybody else on Traxus Nine, things I don't want prying eyes seeing."

"What sort of operations?" Justin grinned again. "You skimming shit off the top?"

Gibson returned the same facial expression. "You could say I occasionally deal under the table."

"You might as well spill the beans while we're flirting with death."

"When the time is right."

"Wellâ€|way to build up the suspense." Justin stepped towards the door. "Jackass."

"Just know that I will eventually clue you in, Justin. _Only_ you."

Justin shrugged. "Whatever."

"Where are you going to?"

"I'm going to get some sleep before we leave."

"What about Sergei? You said you'd keep an eye out for me."

"He's not gonna kill you, Mister Gibson. He wants you alive until he's certain you're useless. Lock yourself in your little panick room if you're still scared. Hell, you've got all the comforts of home here. I'm getting some sleep and don't even think about waking me."

* * *

><p>Immediately after the meeting in Gibson's office, Justin descended the stairwell on his way to bed. Sleep always helped him see things clearer. It was one of a few basic tenets of the Marine.<p>

_A good soldier _always _makes sure they get proper rest, food and water._

There was never any certainty when those opportunities would come again.

He literally just passed the last step at the threshold to the lobby when Chris came into view. Justin already fathomed the kid had been waiting there, waiting for someone to help him ease the passing of time. But unbeknownst to Justin, Chris had been waiting specifically for him.

"Can I talk to you?"

"Make it quick, I'm off to sleep."

"I just thought of something that could save all our asses." Chris grinned. "Listen to thisâ€|

"We have Gibson order parts through his connections. Not just any parts," Chris' eyes flashed, "slipspace parts. He can order a slipspace drive, a small one. We can hole up in the city while we wait on the parts. We'll make sure it's all clear when the shipment arrives at the stockyard, and we'll get to work on the Pelican. It's a lengthy plan and the results don't really come until the end, but I think it's worth it. Freedom."

Justin smiled as he looked Chris up and down. "Hmm, we _could_ do that." Justin fished his pocket for a lighter while placing a cigarette at the tip of his lips, relaxing his rigid stance as if deciding to stay and chat for a while. He lit up, taking in a deep drag. "â€|and we could go on the offensive in the meantime."

Chris' smile faded. "You can't be serious."

"I am. The city has already been breached once. Even if we kill all the zombies inside, we still don't know how many have made it _outside_. They'll keep growing stronger as they move on to nearby towns. And damn us if they reach another city."

"Well, that's okay. We want them outside so we can safely work on the Pelican, yes?"

"No. They'll keep trying to find new ways in. I've been watching the CCTV network here, Chris. You haven't seen what I've seen."

Chris folded his arms. "What have you seen?"

"Actually, it's what I haven't seen. We don't even know where the damned bastards are anymore. They could be anywhere. We don't even know how many they number. And we know they're at least somewhat intelligent. They probably know we're gonna try to get a hold of transport. They'll be more aggressive and more prepared now. We have to end this."

"So how are we gonna deal with them?"

"We're taking another trip to the stockyard for more ammo."

"So we deal with the ones inside, but what about the ones that you say might be outside? We need to secure the city again; this fits rather nicely into my plan."

"I know that, but I'm taking it a step further because then we'll have a Pelican and all the fuel we need. We know that, but they don't know that. And while we keep them down and running, they ain't attacking nobody. We won't just be helping ourselves, either. Think about all those still alive out there, holed up in some shitbox. There could still be factory workers that need saving. And more guns equals more survival. So, we go out there first chance we get, we frag as many of those pussbuckets as possible, and we just generally have a kick-ass time."

"Have you gone completely mad, Justin?"

Reid withdrew his cigarette from his lips and waved it around casually, grinning. "I don't know. What do you think?"

"Please, can you take me seriously for once? Why risk the Pelican and yourself to rack up a few more kills? It's not necessary."

"You think this is about killing?"

"That's what it seems like."

"Let me tell you what it is. First it was us against a few parasites. Now, it's us against a whole horde of these undead humans. And hundreds, maybe thousands have already died out there. They grow stronger the more we wait and argue. We can't let that become us. We can't let the zombies even have the balls to come near us. We have to drive the point into their lopsided heads that they're gonna suffer serious losses if they make a move on us. Like I said, they already made it inside. If we can buy ourselves twenty-four hours after the parts arrive, just twenty-four hours, we might be able to pull off this crazy plan of yoursâ€¦because I actually like it."

"That's an awfully big 'might', Justin. I think we should fortify the city instead of attacking."

"The best defense is a good offense." Justin ashed the cigarette and winked.

"I'm scared."

Justin took another drag and glanced at the boy with a frown. He then gazed off into the void outside the window. "I've been a soldier since I was seventeen years old, Chris. I believe a true soldier waits for a moment like this. And you know what? I'm scared too. And that tells me we're in the right place at the right time."

Whatever response Chris had next was stammered. He never heard words like those come from Justin. He thought words like those were impossible to hear from someone so reluctant to be human, so reluctant to harbor vulnerabilities and welcome sympathy. He looked up and admired him for merely a fraction of a second before seeing nothing but foolish, stubborn determination returning to Justin's eyes.

"These are still our lives we're talking about, Justin."

"Yeah, well, like or not we're all soldiers now."

Chris' eyes glazed over with a frustration he couldn't fully express.

"And soldiers have their..._duty_?"

"Right." Justin answered firmly, locking eyes with Chris again. "We're all in this together, kid. You wanna be different? Be my guest. You don't have to follow me."

"Tell me something. Are you going to _order_ them to go with you?"

Justin clenched his jaw. "â€|No. Of course I can't." He took his last drag and threw the but to the linoleum floor, squashing it with his boot an instant later. "I'll put it to them."

"Go ahead, then. _Put_ it to them." Chris walked away.

* * *

><p>The sun had barely surpassed the horizon, rising higher at a snail's pace.<p>

No light permeated through the admin windows just yet; the atmosphere was naturally and artificially too constrictive. Already, the air outside rose a few degrees in temperature nonetheless, another cold day dawning. Strangely enough, everyone had a decent measure of rest during the night, all of them waking in close sync from the far-reaching influence of an indifferent star.

Despite the dangers that awaited them, each was ready for the task at hand. It was a dreary chain of causality that led them all to this end, this crossroads of fate. They'd be venturing into the unknown that was the aftermath of City 17. With no tangible advantages in their favor, they'd hoof it on foot unarmed and ill-equipped in every conceivable way. The outcome of their trek was a akin to the careless toss of dice.

Justin managed to claim himself a room before the night had fully settled in, small but with privacy. He had pulled in a couch from the main lobby, which was more comfortable than the igloo's couch. This one wasn't a health hazard like his, either.

Justinâ€”always the earliest riser out of the groupâ€”had awoken just as the faintest rays profoundly refracted by the many mediums in the air, struck the window sill outside his room. For the moment, he laid there in peace over his improvised bed. He heard the muffling of footsteps outside the door, then watched it opened through still-heavy eyes. There, standing in the door frame was Layla.

He sat up and strained to see past the fog of sleep. "Something wrong?"

He couldn't see clearly, but her hands were interlocked together over her waist.

"No." she said, hanging her head an instant later. "â€|Maybe."

"What is it?"

She proceeded a single step into the room and shut the door behind her.

"You probably already know this...Everyone's worried. No matter how much it won't show, they're worried. I'm worried."

Justin shrugged. "Well, that's natural. But I think we've all had enough of waiting. We've all been over this. We know that there's a chance for us in the city. I think we're all ready for that now."

Layla shyly took another step further inward. She gave a petite, slight chuckle that went perfectly with her petite silhouette. "Sheer boredom makes us ready."

"Yeah, we need a change. Nothing wrong with that."

A still, silent moment passed. Layla hung her head once more. "I just wanted to let you know before we go outside...that I really appreciate you coming back for me in the factory. I don't know how long I could've lasted."

She inched closer, nearing the foot of the couch.

Justin remained motionless, his mind devoid of things to say.

"No problem. Is there something else?"

"No. Unless I'm intrudingâ€”"

"â€”No." Justin replied.

"I didn't expect you to be so quiet. What's wrong?"

"Nothing." he said.

"C'mon, you can tell me. You don't want to be alone, do you? Even if this might be the last chance we'll get?"

"It's just thatâ€”I haven't had to care about anyone in a long time."

"You care about your friends, don't you?"

"That's different. We were all just thrown together in this place."

"But you grew on each other with time."

"Sure."

"So what is wrong with one more friend?" She said, scooting closer, her knees resting on the cushions. Her eyes suddenly filled with something that Justin had longed for many years. Her face was aflush with affection.

"Because, Layla, when I look into your eyesâ€"

"â€"Yes?"

"...I see someone that I could truly care for."

"All these years...why didn't you ever take a chance on me?"

"Because I could lose you so easily in this horrible place. I'm scared to even try."

"You don't _have _to try." she said, gazing softly upon his face. She gingerly took a seat next to him. "Before we wake the others, do you think you could you just hold me for a while?"

* * *

><p>On the rooftop, the scenery was tranquil. The dense fog lingered among the eaves of the building, leaving a clearing directly above their heads, creating a natural oculus into the sky above. Blue-grey was a color rarely seen in the world, equally as soothing. But Joe and Ken had trouble getting any sustained sleep. It was either an hour here or an hour there, no REM for either of them. They were on edge over the next mission to come. They'd be venturing into the heart of City 17, the very place they tried to get away from in the first place, as the parasitezombie horde overran them. For the moment, things were actually peaceful. The wind had died down, now just a subtle breeze. The air temperature rose along with the sun, even though the light was choked off as usual. But lingering in the back of their minds was the feeling, the proverbial calm before the storm.

Ken looked around: Joe was awake as he wiped the fog of sleep from his eyes. "So did you have a girl on Sirius 6B?" he asked Joe.

Joe, who had been awake for the last hour, hung in thought for a moment, with a hearty smile draping his face an instant later. "I did."

"What was her name?"

"Jessica. Jessica Hanson, from Pittsburg. She had the most beautiful, black hair. Like a raven."

"What else did she look like?" Ken asked, sitting straighter.

"Her eyes had wisdom in them, you know? She was slender. Her skin was white like porcelain and smooth. She was perfect. Too perfect."

Ken laughed. "How can a woman be too perfect?"

"Because she wasn't even"

"Hey!" A deep voice shouted from near the staircase. "I changed my mind."

"Hey, Bill!" Ken said, waving him over. "Glad you decided to join us. Get your holy ass over here and join the conversation!"

"Yeah, I worked up the nerve after a power nap." Bill wouldn't yet admit that he hadn't slept a wink. A voice was trapped in his head, a low rumbling, and no amount of prayer could will it away. "Didn't feel like being alone."

Bill strolled up to their corner of the rooftop, where the eaves rose just above the ledges. It made a nice windbreaker for the three of them.

"You okay?" Ken asked. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine."

"If you say so. Just jittery before we move out?"

"Something like that."

"So tell me a little more about Sirius Six-B." Ken said, turning back to Joe.

Joe huddled his arms in close to his body, confining himself to the inside his jacket, which was now oozing out body heat with every shift of movement. He nestled himself in the exact corner and made himself comfortable. He looked down at the shingles of the roof, kicking a few stray pebbles from underneath. He sighed comfortably once rested. "Let me bum a smoke from you before I go on any further. Ran out yesterday."

"Sure." Ken said.

Joe took it, graciously nodded and lit up. "Sirius Six-B, huh? Well, it wasn't much different than this place. Cold and ugly, industry everywhere. Only thing different about us is that we lived our last years there in a nuclear winter."

"_Damn_."

Joe nodded.

"Nothing changes." Ken shook his head.

"Tell me about it." Joe said.

"Funny" Bill interjected, picking his head up into the wind. "That philosophers much like you and I are powerless to change it

all."

"So what caused the war on Sirius Six-B?" Ken asked.

"It was energy. Earth was running out of it. They used their last reserves to mine other planets. A conglomerate of scientists and engineers known as the New Economic Block discovered Berynum on Sirius Six-B, the great answer to the world's energy question. A spoonful of Berynum could take you from Earth to Saturn in a day. I came to that place to take Berynum out of the ground for the New Economic Block. Hell, we were all nebs back then. When miners and scientists found radiation coming out of the ground they refused to work it and shut down the mines. The NEB Corporation threatened armed force to reopen them, so there was a standoff for about four years.

...and then they started to rain everything down on us. Nuclear disk bombs, fuel-air bombs, bacteria crystals. We were decimated. Civilian survivors were evacuated and we holed up in the bunkers ever since then."

"How did you fight back?" asked Ken.

"We reinvented man's first modern weapon."

* * *

><p>"Me and the other girls used to talk about you during shift."<p>

Layla was curled up in Justin's embrace, the two of them lying side by side on the couch. His left arm was draped over her waist. He'd grown more affectionate with every passing minute, and the warmth radiating between their huddled bodies became electric.

"I didn't know City Seventeen was gossip central." Justin replied softly.

"Oh, it is. You'd be surprised. Girls talk no matter where they go."

"I see." Justin smiled.

"We used to call you Camo Reid."

"Why's that?"

Layla perched herself up, now sitting up and leaving the warmth. She turned around to lock eyes with him. "Because you were camouflaged everywhere you went. You wore the camouflage like it was your own face. You never talked. You never wanted to be talked to. You were just in and out every day, so serious all the time."

Justin grinned and grabbed a hold of Layla's hand, caressing her knuckles. "This is a serious place."

"Trying to teach a tough girl to be tough, are you?"

Justin looked away. "Someone's at the door. Hold on."

"How can you tell?"

"There's a shadow under it."

Justin got up and scooped his knife off a nearby table. He stepped to the door as Layla watched.

"Wait here." he said.

He went to the door and opened it just an inch. Standing there was Kaiser Sergei. A low rumble sounded off in between Justin's ears, then went away.

He refocused back to the Kaiser. He had the usual, sly glimmer in his eyes, establishing visual contact with Justin as the door opened somewhat wider.

"I was wondering when we're getting the day started. Everyone is restless. It seems now is as good a time as any to get going."

"I know, Sergei. We'll be leaving soon enough."

"Since we're entrusting our lives to you and your plan, I wanted to ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"How did you become a Marine officer?"

"I graduated WestPoint."

"Which locale?"

"Reach."

The Kaiser nodded. "And I understand that WestPoint has a very fine program academically."

"It seems I've answered your question."

Justin closed the door, but a firm, outstretched arm pushed it open again.

"Have you had any real combat experience on top of all that theory?"

"Plenty."

"Name one instance in which you commanded."

"Jericho Seven. Light Reaction Force of fifteen Marines. Seven skirmishes with three Covenant squads in one night. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes, it is. And I do believe you're telling the truth."

"Unlike you." Justin closed the door, but Sergei once again barred it open. "What now?"

"Have you had the chance to talk with Chris since the battle in the

courtyard?"

"Yeah, why?" Justin glanced behind him to where Layla was sitting. She sat motionless and didn't make a sound.

"You should've seen him outside when he had that gun. He must've put down ten all by himself. He actually saved my life. I owe the boy."

"Hard to imagine you owing anybody."

"Remember, we're all equals; you said that yourself: just a bunch of rotten sons-of-bitches fighting for our survival. And really, don't we all do that every day? You and I, we're not so different."

"There's a difference between self-preservation and murder. You are a murderer. That's how you prosper. And you're doing that once we part ways. Your army is out there doing it as we speak, so don't even try to mindfuck me. Your days of manipulating people are over, not while I'm in charge."

"Ha! You are denser than I once thought. Murder, as you call it, can be a necessary evil. And here, it most certainly is in most cases. Have you ever comprehended the amount of conflicts I've put to rest over the years? Crushing your enemy in one, swift stroke prevents the kind of suffering that is seen on a scale too large to comprehend, too large to revert back to the way it was. You should know this; you and I are living in it. Look at what this place has become, Justin."

"I wonder whose fault that is."

"People like Gibson. They know nothing about honor or living by the sword. They figured out greed wasn't enough once we proved a threat to them and their capitalism, so they created Hell on this planet and made us serve in it. In the end, I was to unite the people against that evil, end the gang wars, shape them all into a force much larger than THI could deal with. We could have won, too. In the end, I would've created stability and a true sense of freedom among the lesser privileged in this world."

"Instead, you just went ahead and killed, what, thousands of innocents? Yeah..."

"Again, by necessity, not by design. Regretfully, some of my own conspired against me...which harkens back to your self-preservation complex. Only through war was there to be peace after that. And it's the only way to deal with THI and people like the administrator. Some people could never accept that, but all that means is that they cannot see the bigger picture. Can you see the bigger picture yet?"

"What sort of stability are you talking about? You don't create for other people, you never have. You don't have that right. You're not a one-man government. You're just a slave here like everyone else! All these years, you still haven't accepted that. You've spilt blood, shattered families. All you've done is destroy. The world wasn't at war until you got here! You turned life on Traxus Nine into a prison with a life sentence for everyone in it."

"No, THI did that with the help of the New Model Army."

Justin shook his head. "Nothing changes with you. When's that sad, old dream of yours gonna die? And don't even try blaming this infestation on me."

"Look, I don't have an axe to grind. I came here to help you out. Help _us _out."

"You shouldn't have anything to say to me because I have nothing to say to you. We're working together right _now_, which doesn't mean we're on equal footing. We're polar opposites and nothing you say matters to me."

"Fine. I'm the Devil you can see, but what about the Devil you can't see? Open your eyes and look past everything you've known in this world, because these creatures of yours don't care whether we're at odds with each other or not. They won't afford us the time to find a solution. The real subject at hand is the boy."

"How is Chris going to keep us alive? Right, you owe him your life for what he did back at the factory. Great, give the kid some alcohol and be on your way."

"You give him no credit. Pretty soon, you'll owe him your life as well. The boy has a plan to save us all. If only you'd realize that your solutions aren't the only correct ones."

"I heard about Chris' plan and I'll consider it."

"Then you know the plan is to get off this ashtray."

Justin scoffed. "The _plan_," he corrected, "is to get to Gibson's Pelican and fly city-to-city to regroup with other survivors. We're all alone out here and that's not good. I'm fine with waiting until the parts get here, but we need a bridge to survive 'till then. I'm not going to assume the world is peachy out there while we sit around with thumbs up our asses! You can stay with us and fight or you can go it alone and go straight to Hell for all I care."

Justin remained with the door open, staring confidently back at Kaiser Sergei.

"We've been slaves to the Traxus Heavy Industries for way too long." Sergei asserted. "Don't underestimate the boy's plan. And don't go putting our only escape asset at risk; there's only one Pelican."

"Fine." Justin said. "We'll worry about that later. Get outta here and get ready. We're moving out soon if you're still intersted in that."

"That boy looks up to you, Reid."

"Mention that again, and you'll find yourself on your own."

Sergei nodded and turned away, strolling towards the lobby.

* * *

><p>Morning was now in full effect. Even still, the light was unsurprisingly choked off by the haze in the air. One by one, the individuals in the admin building gathered in the lobby.<p>

Justin took a head count as he stood by the main door.

"Good. Alright, look, we've got a lot of walking to do today. It's about a graveball field to the tunnel. It's about another two and a half to get through it, and then another field to get into the factory once on the other side. It may very well turn into running if we meet trouble. We may have to beat feet pretty hard, so if anyone thinks they can't hustle, you need to say something now. You can stay here in the admin building and wait it out, but you will be waiting until the rest of us can bring back food and water. Be on the safe side, or die as one of those things, it's your choice. If you can't keep up, don't step up. I don't speak for anyone else when I say this, but I won't be doubling back for your sorry ass if you get tired, trip up, sprain an ankle, whatever. From here to the factory, it's everyone for themselves.

But make no mistake...no matter what happens, we're getting into that factory and into that stockyard. Otherwise, we're dying a slow and agonizing deathâ€|and that ain't my style! So just suck it up and survive. That's why you all put me in the lead. You wanna bitch about it now? Then do as you please. I'm going to take this planet back from these assholes." Justin nodded at Gibson. "Got your datapad handy?"

Gibson nodded back swiftly.

"Good. We're gonna need it every step of the way. For starters, tell me if the perimeter is clear."

Gibson peered into his datapad, tapping a few keys, inspecting the display. After a good moment, "It's all clear. We can exit."

Justin turned and opened the door. Cool, dry air whisked in along with the blunt scent of chemical vapors. "God damn I miss that smell." He turned back to address the group. "Alright, stay sharp. We need all eyes and ears focused and working together if we're gonna make it. And whatever happens, don't let Ken get hurt."

Justin took two steps out the door and stood in the courtyard. He let his eyes adjust to the light after being so accustomed to artificial illumination inside the building. He let the cool air fill his jacket. He then looked toward the gaping black hole that was the tunnel entrance.

"Let's move."

26. The Devil is in the Details

The Devil is in the Details

Justin led the way a few paces in front of the pack.

Possibly the only reason some of his followers hadn't panicked, lost cohesion and scattered in random vectors was the fact that his

strides were fluid and careless as if he were actually strolling along in a park on a sunny afternoon. Like a picture perfect ending to a picture perfect day, he strode.

It was ten years ago in his mind. Right here, this very square, before the world turned ugly.

The air was less putrid. The courtyard wasn't barren. Citizens actually subsisted in safety. They basked in relative harmony with one another before the world experienced its inflationary population boom. Presently as Justin walked, he felt the firm pressure of hardened ground beneath his steady footfalls—“even harder than the surrounding clay landscape. Underneath the sands of time that had rolled over the wind-swept land, cobblestone was laid—ten years ago. A quaint attempt at a town square setting. Such frivolities were a necessity now and then, affording wandering colonists a sense of home. But as industry took a hold under the reign of THI, the model of the factory-city became standardized. Every city became a Carbon copy of others before it and each one further paved over the implied foundation of conformity and homogeny in layers.

It was a sign of failures to come.

And they came in spades.

The traditionally lower-class jobs attracted certain types. That was understood universally. But once THI announced the planet as their shipping hub, black marketeers flocked in droves to claim it as well. That's when the likes of Kaiser Sergei descended down on Traxus IX.

What followed were all the horrific events that led Justin to his present place in the cosmos.

Truthfully, Justin's lax carriage as he walked was half pretense. He knew perfectly well that nerves would be on edge today. This was probably the most danger any of them had put themselves through, and he wasn't sure if he was sensitive to that fact or simply mired by it. If there was any trouble, they'd slow him down—“probably all of them. Their capabilities just weren't up to snuff. And he had made it quite clear before the start of this fateful trek that he wouldn't be giving any handouts, not this time around. Compounding his followers' stress, whether they knew it or not, was the fact that they had terrible preparation for this journey: they had no psychological crutches like loaded weapons, armor, vehicles, or even the air of total and unbiased cooperation from one another. There was no team element in play. Furthermore, they'd spent the last five days cooped up in a structure that became a prison more so than the world they inhabited. Their nerves were on edge simply because they were eager to witness the next big event; there was no telling how any of them would react to it despite how well he had them figured.

But by pure body language alone, Justin already had command of the group.

Justin mused again, mused about a better time...

Ken was piloting, Major Renault was co-piloting in the NAV station. Chaplain William Santhouse, Technician Pete Barker, Captain Justin Reid and all his Marines occupied the troop bay. It was simple. It

was just a cake-walk humanitarian op on some frontier world. Establish relations, keep the peace, enjoy the nightlife and make memories.

Justin broke his stride ever so slightly as he glanced behind him to Kaiser Sergei, arguably the man who ruined it all. The king of criminals exuded the same sort of poise Justin did, thoughtfully gazing off into the ambiance of the courtyard with a content smile, and it made Justin's blood boil. But he needed Sergei, just like he needed him. It was a symbiotic relationship of pure necessity, pure aggravation.

Justin turned back to the front. There, beckoned the tunnel entrance. Now that he saw it, he couldn't take his mind off things to muse about better days. Sergei occupied a special place in his memories and was a stain on all of them. He couldn't erase what had been put there. He'd have to live without the memory of better days for now.

_Good, _he thought. _Better for the mission at hand._

The darkness seemed to swallow them all as they neared the threshold.

* * *

><p>Layla instinctively scooted up right behind Justin as the world grew dark. She looked back, witnessing the muted ambiance behind them seemingly wave goodbye. Their footsteps gradually amplified, echoing off the confines of the surrounding of mortar and brick the deeper they progressed inward. "I don't like this." Layla whispered emphatically.<p>

Justin glanced over his shoulder, "Me neither, but this is the only way."

"Guess we don't have to stay on edge for the time being." the Kaiser quipped. An instant later, he could sense the majority of the group's eyes on him. "Only one direction to be concerned about." he smiled.

"So shut up then." Justin lashed back.

No more was said as Sergei smiled.

Justin brought up his arm and glanced down to his wristwatch. The electroluminescent display showed 0800â€"fifteen minutes behind schedule already. Furthermore, sunrise was always at 0700 during this celestial cycle. One hour had already gone by, a total waste. Fourteen hours from now, the sun would go down and they'd all have to hunker down for the night somewhere. Justin was planning on getting everything done in one dayâ€"getting back into the inner sanctum for at least an assessment of the place, infiltrating the stockyard for ammunition, and then securing the city from within. If everything went well, food and water could become a top priority. But things were clearly beginning to falter. If the trend continued...

Justin smartly quickened his step ever so gradually so the others would subconsciously follow without complaint. He stole a glance back at them. He could barely see their faces. He glanced back to the

front: he could make out a faint glitter of the titanium fencing. "Not much further, everyone. Just hang in there. Things are going well."

Despite the encouraging words, no one felt at ease. Eyes and ears were attuned to any and all stimuli, possibly more than was practical. Justin himself knew that one could force paranoia on themselves if they focused too much. He knew that everyone was ready for anything, though not sure how to react to any possible threat. Everyone had capabilities and limitations. One solution was viable for any encounter with their common enemy in their combat-ineffective state—"run the other way. But there was no telling just how intelligent the creatures were and thus how avoidable future combat was. Any threat from in front could be a flusher designed to drive them back where the rest of the alien pack waited. It was possible that the creatures knew more about Traxus IX than they did, seeming to be an indigenous species. Boxing the humans in was likely in the works. There was no telling. Justin's group had very little intel, which was devastating in itself as Gibson had warned. They had no weaponry and they were just barely getting along. Surely, everyone could find comfort in one of Bill's facetious prayers by now.

The Kaiser quickened his step as well, though he did it not to keep pace with Justin; it was to work his way alongside the boy, his newfound confidant in this survival game.

He whispered, "So how did Justin take up your idea?"

"You mean your idea."

"What? C'mon. What I meant to say was our idea."

Chris shook his head.

"I know you're strung out, so am I." the Kaiser said, glancing up to the head of the pack where Justin was walking. He then pulled out a stylish, chrome flask from his breast pocket. "Here," he whispered lower, unhinging the top, "take some. Wake you up a bit."

Chris accepted it graciously. Even though it was just about pitch black inside the tunnel, he noticed the sides of the metal case had intricate engravings. "What does that say?" Chris said, pointing. "Those symbols."

The Kaiser smiled. "You've got great eyesight, kid. The words are Russian. It means, 'Give to yourself by giving to the people'. It is a Koslovic statement, first uttered many years ago."

"What is Koslovic?"

The Kaiser smiled wider. "Justin can tell you all about it if we ever make it outta here."

"Fair enough." Chris said taking a sip. He swallowed it down and coughed raggedly. "â€|it burns."

"That means it's still good." Sergei chuckled. "There's an old folk saying on Russia Two. 'The moment you start drinking that Bosnian brandy, the Devil can be seen pointing and laughing at you.'"

Chris regarded the flask one last time before handing it back to Sergei. "I'll bet."

"Listen," Sergei said, "keep pressing your argument to him. I know Justin. He wants to leave this place as bad as any of us. He'll need constant reinforcement from you."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Chris said. "I think he wants some sort of personal payback with these things."

"Why do you suppose he's so intent on wiping them out?"

"I wouldn't know. Maybe it's because they killed Pete, or maybe it's as simple as Justin getting his home back."

"Well, in any case, keep trying. You know it is the best plan possible, right?"

Chris shrugged. "Sure."

"Why the long face? C'mon, it is the one solution where everyone comes out on top. A square deal. Tell me, where will you go when you leave this place? What goals did you have in life?"

"...Join the United Earth Space Corps."

"Be a Marine?" Sergei chuckled heartily. "You know, that doesn't surprise me all that much. I'm not poking fun at you, either. Seriously, that's great. An honorable profession. Surely you'll go places and see things, do things that very few others can. I figured you for an adventurous type, too. You look up to Justin so much."

Chris stared ahead into the blackness. "Guess you figured me out for the most part."

"See? I know people. I'm a people person. Take it from me when I say that Justin simply needs a little more affirmation that leaving this place is better than settling some score with a bunch of zombies. Do we see eye to eye now?"

"Yes."

Chris' discussion with Justin back in the admin building didn't fare well. It was two steps forward and one back. He bought into the escape plan which settled the long-term survivability, but it partially backfired on Chris. Even with the sound logic of Kaiser's plan, it only seemed to invigorate Justin's quest for revenge ever more. Chris was beginning to wonder whether Sergei was right earlier—maybe fighting and winning was too engrained into Justin. Even after ten years of separation from the UESC, it was obvious he would use the Pelican for nothing more than the warhorse it was designed to be while the slipspace parts were en route to City 17. He was going to hunt down the enemy, hoping that survivors would band together and take out the infestation as if bound by common duty.

It scared Chris: not just the thought of Justin putting himself in such danger, but because he was the only one capable of pulling off the unorthodox installation. Retrofitting an FTL drive into a small, rugged transport vessel had never been attempted, Chris assumed. It

would be the first of its kind, and that meant it would be difficult. Justin couldn't be venturing out into the world with so much wrong in it. His luck would run out sooner or later.

It was simply a matter of time.

The pressure was on Chris to prevent it.

* * *

><p>At a stone's throw away from the massive tunnel gate, Justin slowed to a stroll. Everyone else mirrored his move, whether they were conscious of that or not.<p>

Up ahead, through the constrictive screen of the titanium mesh, the view was limited. Extra care had to be taken now. Justin halted. He scanned up and down, left and right across the gate. Though he was certain the gate was closed, there was no way to confirm if it was actually locked, from this distance. He had to get closer.

Not that a locked gate was a detriment to their missionâ€"Gibson had unlimited access to the entire city; he could scan them all in no problem. It was the fact that a locked or unlocked gate told of something. It would confirm to Justin whether or not the way ahead was safe. If there was trouble anywhere ahead, a locked gate meant safety.

"Stay here." Justin ordered the group.

He crept forward. Feeling his breath quicken, he retrieved his shotgun from beneath his coatâ€"merely for novelty. If there _was _trouble, maybe the mere sight of a weapon would yield some kind of favored reaction out of the enemy. They exuded some measure of intelligence, so maybe they learned by now that shotguns didn't play well with others.

Justin glanced down only with his eyes to the floor. He panned left, he panned right. Two deadbolts were locked in place, sunken into the bedrock. He wanted so desperately to glance upwards to the upper deadbolts, but the view beyond the mesh was so distorted and hazy that he might very well have been staring a zombie in the face without even knowing it. He got to within a meter of the entry point. He had to know for sure that the way was safe. Leveling the shotgun ahead at chest height, he slowly panned upwards.

Twin deadbolts were fully extended into their cavities. He sighed.

"It's safe."

The others jogged up to his position. Everyone slowly took in their surroundings while Justin ran up a short ramp off to the side of the road. Now on a slightly elevated platform, he crouched behind the guard console that controlled the gate. He found one of many breaker switches and slid it over to the _ON _position. An instant later, fluorescent lights flickered overhead for a few seconds. Once the ballasts fully warmed up, the flicker ceased and solid illumination bathed them all in an instant. He activated another switch, and now robust flood lamps lit the way beyond the gate. Every single survivor now had total vantage and piece of mind. The only concern now was the

way they had come from. But it looked clear.

Justin eased his stance and leaned up against a wall, retrieving a cigarette pack from his pocket. "Let's take a break just for a little while." Justin said. "I'm gonna figure out our next move."

"No need to." Gibson spoke up. The admin took long and graceful strides up the ramp and next to Justin. His chest puffed. "Watch this."

He knelt down as Justin had earlier, finding an alphanumeric keypad on the console. Gibson's belt produced an audible crackle as his swollen stomach expanded against it. Justin hoped that his obesity wouldn't slow them down. For Gibson was a key member of this group. If Gibson slowed down, that meant everyone slowed down. And slowing down was a problem in and of itself.

Justin put that concern in the back of his mind and watched as the admin began punching in a code on the surface of a touch-sensitive screen. It was a long sequence of input commands too. Gibson would type in a set of numbers and letters, and the program would respond back with some sort of query—one that only he knew. Another moment of this question-answer sequence of Boolean Logic, Gibson stood up slowly. He turned to face the nearby wall.

Nothing happened.

"What are you looking at?"

"Wait."

No sooner had Gibson said that, a section of concrete wall sunk inwards and slid to one side, revealing a hidden chamber.

"I'll be damned." Justin said. "You do have special privileges."

Gibson winked. "It's good to be king. C'mon, everyone. This'll cut our journey in half."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Justin said.

* * *

><p>Justin entered the passageway right behind Gibson. It was incredibly narrow, only able to pass one person at a time. The ceiling was intrusively low as well, merely two meters high. And the corridor was dimly lit, wall-mounted LED panels casting their red glow down towards the floor, merely lighting the path before their feet. The walls themselves were barely visible.<p>

"What is this place and where does it go?" Justin asked.

Gibson glanced over his shoulder to Justin as he walked straight ahead. "This is a service shaft. It was built when the city was first constructed." Gibson raised his voice higher as he neared a whirring generator half sunken into the oncoming left-hand wall. He had to compete with all the wind in his lungs against the antiquated machinery. "THIS WILL GO IN ABOUT ANOTHER FIFTY METERS, AND THEN WE'LL TAKE A DEDICATED PATH BACK TO THE FACTORY."

"GOOD CALL ON THIS." Justin complimented.

The noise from the generator had nowhere to go but in their ears, but now the T-junction was in sight dead ahead. As Justin approached it on Gibson's lead, the noise attenuated greatly.

Gibson assessed the new path briefly. "Everything is still ship-shape." he said. "As soon as everyone catches upâ€|"

Justin spun around and caught sight of Chris striding purposefully closer, with Bill, Ken and Joe in tow. Not too far behind them was Kaiser and his three goons. Justin scowled as he glanced at him. He strolled down the corridor glancing left and right with an approving smile on his face, as if he were the VIP himself inspecting Gibson's facility. In between the metaphorical good and evil, was Justin's newfound love, Layla. Justin turned to Gibson again. "Alright," Justin said, "we're all here."

"Good." Gibson momentarily stood on his toes and then raised his brow, easily gaining everyone's attention. "We're taking the path on my left. We have small MAGLEV cars to get us there quicker. But I'm not too sure if the tram system is still working. Wait here while I warm up the grid."

With that, Gibson turned to face yet another wall, only this time there was a plainly visible doorway. He opened it and stepped through. Justin only caught a glimpse of the inside before Gibson deftly closed the door behind him.

Justin took the idle time to look the group over.

Standing next to him was Layla, his newfound love. Her eyes beamed back at his, but he broke off contact an instant later. He wasn't keen on broadcasting their precious relationship to everyone else, especially, Kaiser Sergei. Justin daydreamed about the future for a fleeting instant, about how great their love could grow for each other if they could actually escape this hellhole.

Justin snapped back into the game. If that future was to manifest into reality, he needed to put all his focus into this mission.

He swept his gaze over everyone. Chris, Ken, Bill and Joe Hendricksson were still very much in one piece, both mentally and physically. Next, was his reluctant appraisal of Kaiser and his men. Justin didn't read too much into their exterior or into their eyesâ€the windows to the soul. He merely did a brief once over, for he cared not for them, even though the more guns the better. Jaggo, the half-blind elderly cripple looked steady, but Justin knew that he was anything but physically imposing. He'd be a constant liability. Then again, that could be a blessing in disguise. If there was trouble ahead, Jaggo could be a sacrificial lamb for them allâ€a piece of food between them and the zombie threat. Justin stored that tidbit in the back of his mind for later, if such a time came.

The other two of the Kaiser's goons were very much stoic. They were ready and able, just like Sergei himselfâ€who had that typical glimmer in his eye; always thinking and working things out. As the king of criminals met Justin's gaze, Justin knew he couldn't trust him. Not ever. The only thing they had in common, Justin now knew

beyond a shadow of a doubt, was that they both had a desire to survive. Just a pure will to endure the trials of life. That was it. The Kaiser stood for nothing. _Even in all my misfortune, I still kept an even keel. _Justin thought. _Kaiser Sergei doesn't deserve to escape._

Before Justin could muse on, Gibson opened the door and took his place in the corridor again.

"What'd you do?" Justin asked. "Did you get it to work?"

"We'll know in a second." Gibson answered. "The power system has to cycle. It may take a while since the grid hasn't been charged in quite some time."

Justin nodded, then looked around sheepishly.

A moment later, the lights around them flickered and dimmed. Gibson said, "No worries. The network is drawing power for initial charge. We'll be on our way shortly."

Justin stood on his toes and checked the way they came from, looked back towards the tunnel entrance to the corridor. Nothing. He took a deep breath.

"Alright," Gibson said, "Let's go."

"Wait now." the Kaiser said authoritatively. "Where does this lead?"

"We're working our way towards the ship." Gibson said with careful, diplomatic tone.

"Very well. We shall see."

The admin proceeded down one leg of the T-junction. About ten meters in and the left-hand wall recessed about a meter, where a monorail emerged from an underground opening and stretched as far into the distance as anyone could see. At regular intervals, support braces for the single balustrade were anchored about half a meter off the ground.

"Each car fits only two people. Justin and I will go first and scout the way. The cars are set to be spaced at hundred meters. They accelerate to a top speed of ten meters per second, if I recall correctly. This means that after we board the first car, it'll be at least another ten seconds before you all depart. Pick your partners now and be ready to go when your ride arrives. I'm sure Justin would agree with meâ€"we need not waste any amount of time here. The sooner we all regroup at the factory, the sooner we can get on with surviving. There's plenty of food and drink in the city, I'm sure you all know that." Gibson's eyes lost focus as he tilted one ear in the direction of the rail aperture. "I hear the first one coming. Justin?"

"I'm ready." Justin said. He turned around and took two steps closer to Ken, whispering to his ear, "Do me a favor? Look out for Layla, would ya?"

Ken smiled. "Sure."

Justin took his place next to Gibson, who nodded.

The car slowly emerged out into the open and momentarily halted at the rail's neighboring loading platform. The car's were nearly circular in shape. The body panels were white fiberglass, sleek and smooth. The upper 'hemisphere' was a frameless and clear rigid plexiglass composite, allowing occupants a 180-degree view of their surroundings. Gibson stepped forth and opened its door. Justin diligently entered after Gibson, the container gently rocking under their combined weight. Once seated, Gibson keyed a command on a side-mounted interface. The car gently accelerated into the lighted tunnel and soon grew smaller.

That now left everyone waiting for another one of the petite ferries to arrive.

Kaiser checked his time piece. "It's not even mid day yet." he grinned. "Indeed things are going well."

"Yeah, well don't jinx it." Ken said.

"I'm just trying to liven up the mood."

Ken would've said something spiteful back, but creating more tension just wasn't a good idea. Not with so much wrong already. This alliance, itself, was wrong. Not in a million years would Ken even want to be in the same vicinity as the Kaiser. But pure necessity mandated it.

Everyone there could now hear the sound of an approaching car, the long strands of dust wipers sweeping over its smooth cowl from overhead as it emerged.

"Joe, you take Layla with you on this one." Ken announced. "Then, Chris and I will go." Joe went to reach for the door, then glanced back to Bill, trying not to make it too obvious that he was nervous when he asked, "You gonna be okay, Bill?"

Though the question wasn't directed to Ken, he was already on the same page as Joe. He wanted to look the Kaiser and his men over, as if their demeanor could give them away this instant, but he fought that urge. He didn't want to make the situation too obvious either (that Bill would be forced to take up residence with the Kaiser, or one of his men for the ride to the factory). But Bill was probably not even worth their time, Ken surmised. He was harmless, a fly on the wall. "He'll be fine." Ken nodded.

Ken held open the door for the next two up, and Joe entered the car after Layla.

The car sped up to its hard-set cruise and soon faded from sight in the yawning tunnel. As soon as that happened, the Kaiser stepped closer to Chris. "Make sure you keep on top of Justin. Sometimes people just need things drilled into them, especially people like him. He won't respond well to a pushover, so don't be one. Stand firm when you talk to him and believe in the plan."

Chris nodded.

"What plan?" Ken asked, his eyes slightly narrowed.

The Kaiser didn't answer.

Ken turned to Chris. "What plan?"

"Just a plan for the quickest way to get food and stuff."

"I'm not a psychic, Chris, but I know you're lying. What plan?"

"Okay. It's a plan to get us out of here."

"That's it? Give me the specifics."

"I've told Justin and Bill already, and truthfully I'm getting sick of repeating myself. So, if you're so inclined to hear it, go ahead and ask _them_."

"Listen here, Chris, you need to tell me something that makes sense—right now. If Justin ever found out you were in league with this guy, he'd probably, well, I don't really know _what_ he'd do but it wouldn't be good."

"Forget you, Ken. I'm sick and tired of people thinking they're better than me, always shutting me up or lecturing me about something. And now when someone does finally want to listen to me, they're demanding information from me like I was a God damned POW! I'm done with this!"

Ken shook his head. "I wasn't trying to upset you. I'm only trying to look out for you." Ken looked up at Kaiser and glared, before refocusing back on Chris. "You need to be careful what you say and what you listen to. Now, get ready; the next car is coming."

Justin and Mr. Gibson sat across from one another in the cramped car, barely enough leg room for two men of such size. Their lower extremities kept sliding into each other as the car glided around gentle, embanked curves.

With a slight amount of exasperation, Gibson uttered, "We're almost there." He stood up in the car and stared blankly ahead, his mind on something. Suddenly, something caught his attention. Out the window, down to where the single rail's support beams anchored into the ground, a puddle of greenish-white liquid had collected. It was fresh by the looks of it, slowly seeping into the gravel bedrock.

"What are you looking at?" Justin asked.

"I don't know. Probably nothing. Maybe just a coolant leak or a broken hydraulic valve or something."

A pale, white light grew brighter as the car slowed. Justin looked all around through the clear plexiglass of the car's top half. He observed his new surroundings. It was an underground maintenance bay of sorts, immense in volume. Around the periphery, high loading docks—about three meters raised off the ground—stood prominently around the cavernous expanse. Around the surrounding platform's perimeter were wide sheetmetal doors that opened upwards and closed downwards. Every single one was padlocked.

Small personnel ladders provided access from the platform to the deck, which was a smooth poly-resin of some sort, just like the factory floors somewhere above. Huge drain grates occupied the edges of the deck in front of them. This was some sort of dedicated maintenance bay or warehouse from what Justin could gather. He had never seen or heard of this place.

Gibson propped open the door and led the way into the open.

It was quiet, which was good. Justin liked quiet. It was soothing and it would allow him to hear the enemy easily, even though he gauged that they hadn't yet discovered this place. Overhead, Mercury-vapor lamps flooded the bay with a natural, pale-white luminosity like a moon. That was soothing as well.

Justin realized he had stood in the very center of the bay for a good thirty seconds now. He looked to Gibson. "So?" Justin said. "What's the plan? Where to?"

"We've been keeping secrets from each other." Gibson pivoted and instantly reeled in closer to Justin.

"What do you mean, secrets?"

"I mean I think it's time we share a little information, right here and now before the others arrive. We may not get another chance like this."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but if you have a burning question then ask me."

"Okay. Why is it that Ken gets extra protection?"

"Before I say why, let me first answer that question with a question. Do you know how to fly the Pelican? I'm talking about manually, Gibson, not that autopilot routine you go through when you annually change locations."

"Not really."

"That's what I thought. The reason we need to protect Ken more than any other is because, well damnit, you know why; he's the one that flew my squad in ten years ago. Is that seriously what's been eating you?"

"Yes, that's what's eating me. I deserve an equal amount of protection too. It's my Pelican. I'm the one getting us out of here!"

"Well, duh, Mister Gibson; that's kind of inferred, don't you think?"

"Okay, I'm sorry for blowing up there. I guess I just needed some reassurance."

"No problem. Still worried about Sergei?"

"More so than the parasites if I do say so myself."

"Fair enough. Like I said, there's little to worry about now."

"And later?"

"Later is when we're actually up in the air, whenever the Hell that is. Not suffering him, it'll be a miracle if we even last that long."

Gibson rubbed his chin vigorously. "Indeed."

"Okay, now it's your turn." Justin said, folding his arms. "I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

Gibson delayed his response. "Okay, I'm just gonna be straight and tell you. The Pelican has a slipspace drive in it. We can leave this system if we can get to it."

Justin's eyes widened. "_That's_ why you haven't called for help yet. You don't want the big boys upstairs knowing you have yourself a little magic carpet ride outta here in case shit gets ugly again. Tell me you're kidding."

"No."

Justin snapped his finger and smiled wide. "Fucking coincidence, man. Damn, I feel like I'm having déjà vu. Chris had this idea earlier"

A low rumble instantly materialized in the back of Justin's mind. He felt it approaching from somewhere far away, approaching fast like a cosmic Gamma ray burst, aimed solely for him. He felt its presence crescendo like an approaching tsunami, rising without warning. Another instant and it cascaded into a full, titanous roar. Then, the voice surfaced from within as the wave of a thousand tormented voices crashed down upon his soul.

"_A way out? A WAY OUT?_"

Justin's knees buckled and he dropped to the deck.

"What's wrong?" Gibson asked, bending down.

Justin reached out with one hand and Gibson grabbed a hold of it, yanking him back on his feet. Instantly, the voice and the rumble receded to the darkest depths of his imagination. Just as soon as it arrived, it was gone.

"Reid, you okay?"

"I'm fine now. Just bad food in my stomach."

"You sure?"

"Positive." Justin took a moment and a few deep breaths to steady himself. "Now how in the hell does your Pelican have a slipspace drive in it?"

"It's a special unit. Scored myself a scaled-down, commercial variant."

"How did you get it in there?"

"I've used my time wisely here. While the war lords have been slaughtering and the workers stealing 'n dealing, I've been modding this thing in case I ever needed to escape. You're not the only rotten son of a bitch on this planet." Gibson smiled.

"Who put in the wrench time? Couldn't have been you, all by yourself."

"You're right. I had a team of ex-mil contractors do the install. Set my credit back a few years, but well worth it, eh?"

"Fuckin'-aye right it is. This is about the best news I've ever had in my life. Why didn't you tell us all earlier?"

"Because I have to be careful who I tell, don't I?"

Justin nodded in reply.

"And there's just one catch to leaving." Gibson said, checking the MAGLEV rail behind them. The next car was on approach. Gibson hurried his words. "When the drive unit was installed, it sacrificed a lot of room in the rear bay. The occupancy level was originally twelve, now it's seven."

"Always a catch." Justin smiled.

Justin wasn't smiling out of amusement. What Gibson just said was a bitter-sweet realization. Justin did a rough head count of all the survivors.

A way off the planet the modified Pelican was, but it meant there wasn't enough space for all of them. _When will the universe stop pulling fast ones on me? _"So we have to leave someone behind."

"I'm afraid so." Gibson pinched his lower lip. "Now, what is the one thing a caged animal dreams about, Justin?"

"Freedom?"

"_Yes. _Look, we both know there's an easy solution to this problem."

"Sergei."

"Exactly. We can kill two birds with one stone. We leave this place for good, and we can get rid of the man who started it all. Because I don't know about you, but it would be an incredible disservice to the world we brought him to. He'd do it all over again if he got the chance. You know what I mean?"

Justin nodded. He held his arms out wide. "So, where is it?"

"The Pelican? It's through that door." Gibson pointed to the other side of the bay where a small personnel hatch resided. "We're sitting a couple stories under the factory you normally work in. That door over there leads to a small shaft that cuts across under the courtyard and to the underside of the other factory. In between is where she is, prepped and ready to go."

Justin kicked the heel of his boot across the floor. "I'll be damned, Gibson. You are the man."

"Thank me later." Gibson said, glancing over to the arriving car. "We're not outta this yet."

Right as Joe and Layla emerged from the car further aft of them, Gibson leaned in closer, toning his voice down to a whisper. "Keep it a secret for now. It's a delicate subject."

"I know. Not a word."

* * *

><p>The last car had arrived. Everyone had re-grouped in the loadingmaintenance bay. Gibson let everyone take a short break while he consulted a datapad. Justin whispered something to Layla, then strode over to him with a lit cigarette hanging limp from the corner of his mouth. He glanced back to her and saw her smiling. He then turned to face Gibson, the both of them standing square in the middle of the bay.

"Is your little gadget still good for some Intel?"

Gibson slowly took his attention off his datapad and looked Justin in the eye, smiling somberly. "I'm afraid not. I've ensured that no surveillance has been in place while my installation was carried out, so we're flying blind from here to the Pelican. It had to be that way, in case someone was snooping where they shouldn't have."

"Guess that worked _for_ us as well as against us. But no one's been down here since then, right?"

"Right. I'm at least ninety percent sure that no one but me knows this place exists, except the workers I hired, of course. But they're long gone."

"Good." Justin said heartily. He took a slow look around the well-lit area, taking in a smooth drag of his cigarette while droplets of water trickled to the ground under the condenser units in the corner of the bay. Most of the group was teetering on either boredom or exhaustion. They had accomplished a lot of walking and had undergone a good deal of anxiety in the short time since they left the admin district. Justin checked his watch: 0900. Things were moving along quite well. And now that he knew there was a Pelican within reachâ€"one that already completed a slipspace retrofitâ€"he was actually feeling better than he had any other time during his ten years on Traxus IX. Better than all the times he drank up, smoked up, got high. It was right up there, right next to being with Layla. He let himself dream of their future together, for just a brief moment. He felt a warmth in his chest that he hadn't felt in ages. The notion of him and Layla together, in a home, happy for the rest of their weathered days was sweet in his mind, and would be in reality as soon as they left this God-forsaken place.

Gibson looked around the room.

Layla, Ken and Joe were huddled close together, all of them sitting Indian Style. The priest and the boy were conversing about something,

Gibson couldn't tell.

The Kaiser, whom Gibson could almost not even stand to look upon, was already looking directly at him with an animalistic stare, eyes shining like predators' do in the night. He held an Arkansas Stone in one hand as he caressed the edge of his knife against it with the other, swirling and scraping away at the whetstone, honing a deadly edge.

_Right, _Gibson thought. He stowed away his datapad. "Okay, people," he shouted, "let's get on the good foot. Anybody's coming, then c'mon." Gibson leaned in closer to Justin before the rest of the group came their way. "Just one more thing...how and when do you plan to do it?"

"I could slit his throat from behind. Right as he boards the bird. He'll finally get what he's deserved." Justin murmured back. "I'll have the others take on his goons."

"Who, Reid? You've got Ken and Joe, and that's about it."

"Two against three, sure. But with what I'm thinking, Sergei will have a quick death. He'll be down for good with a blade to the jugular. I'll pitch in a hand on the other two. Simple."

"Let's hope." Gibson stood straighter as the remainder of the group came within earshot. "Simple plan, people. Get to the ship, fire it up, circle the courtyard for a minute and see what we can see. After that, I leave it to Justin."

"What then?" the Kaiser asked, "take in the scenery?"

"Take up your concerns with Justin. He's in command."

"Very well, I will."

Gibson strode up to the personnel hatch. He halted just shy of it, pulled up his sagging trousers and nodded to Justin, who came alongside him and wrapped his powerful hands around the quick-acting rotary lock. Justin jerked it counterclockwise to snap it loose of its seal. The water-tight, centrally-dogged door gave a quick, staccato groan. Instantly, he noticed the scent of mineral-fortified synthetic lubricant emanating from the embedded gaskets. Justin continued winding the wheel CCW until there was less and less resistance, now free-rolling. The door slowly hinged open a moment later and Justin pushed it all the way ajar.

"Alright, let's go." Gibson said. He was first in, followed by Justin.

The corridor was once again very narrow, only able to pass one individual at a time. The interior was lit by the same red LEDs from the last secret passageway. The air was rather stuffy and stagnant with the smell of stale, crackled paint and oil lingering.

From over Gibson's shoulder, Justin could make out the hatch at the end. About another thirty meters and they were golden. Justin unzipped his parka partially and brought his survival knife to bear, holding it just inside the Goretex lining. He gripped the handle hard and prepared once again to kill for the greater good.

Justin stowed the blade back to the inner breast pocket, leaving the outer zipper halfway down for quick access.

Gibson approached the threshold to the door. "It's all you, Justin." Gibson said.

Justin once again made to open the door. He achieved a firm grip over the wheel, instantly snapping it loose of its torque on the seals. A few twists and the door gradually slid open on its own well-oiled hinges. He stood aside with the door held open. Gibson swung a leg over the partition and shoved his face into the new bay. He stopped moving.

Justin still remained inside, holding the door open and waiting for everyone else to follow the admin inwards to salvation...waiting to be the last man in so he could take down Kaiser Sergei at the end.

But no one moved a muscle. The admin just remained stationary at the threshold to the bay. Justin took notice and swung his head around the edge of the door, looking to see why Gibson stopped. He wished he hadn't.

At first, Justin immediately noticed the familiar, armored hull of a Pelican dropship resting prominently on its landing gear, a commanding presence towering over all else inside the bay. But filling the epoxy-resin expanse below the mighty bird was a writhing mass of alien flesh, their numbers unfathomable, truly a sea of death.

Justin yanked Gibson inwards by the collar, the admin falling ass-first onto the deck. Justin quietly pressed the hatch closed and wound the locking wheel until it was a chore to do so. A wide smile then consumed his face as he turned, and the corridor filled with his laughter.

Others would happily join Justin in another place and another time if only for the contagious grin and the jesting sounds beaming from him. He leveled his gaze squarely at Bill.

"Where's your God now?"

27. Forced Detour

__**Forced Detourâ€¦**__

Mr. Gibson pushed himself up from the floor slowly and carefully. The lipids on his cheeks deepened in color as his overworked heart strained against the unhealthy weight of his body. He took a moment to collect himself and sent his stubby arms rearward, dusted off his back as best he could while all others tried to contemplate some sort of strategy in their winded breathing. He met Justin's eyes. "We're fucked."

"What did you see?" Chris asked from behind the rising overweight administrator.

Justin doubled over and shook his head at the ground. "Too many of

'em. Too fucking many of 'em..." he trailed off.

"Well, did they see us?"

Catching his breath, Justin shot back with a venomous glare, "I don't think so!"

The LED glow off the walls bathed everyone's shoes in a red glow, faces only half visible despite everyone clearly exuding panic. Gibson took exactly one step to the side and braced his weight against a wall, his breath now fully regained. "Justin, how many of 'em you think?"

"I don't know. A lot, okay? The most I've seen yet."

"This was a bad idea. We should've have gone straight for weaponry before the Pelican. We were too eager. But that's okay. Everyone just be calm. We just need to take another look, Reid. Go on. I need to know _exactly_ how many we're dealing with, once and for all."

Justin huffed once, though not out of frustration. He complied with Gibson's request and spun the rotary lock once more. As its resistance relented, he spun it more slowly to maintain the precautionary silence. Once the dog ears were free of the steel frame, he inched the door open very carefully, hoping beyond even his own cynicism that a rusty creaking wouldn't squander their stealth. A new light entered the corridor as he placed his head outside with hands still on the door, ready to slam it shut if need be.

He panned around with only his eyes.

Nothing had changed. About forty meters out, stacks of wire shelving laden with electro-mechanical diagnostic equipment and aircraft spares gave way to an open expanse of epoxy-resin maintenance flooring, mostly clean save for a blanket of dust that had accumulated in months' absence of general housekeeping. The carpet of parasites farther out kicked up rooster tails of the particulate a few inches into the air as they scurried about. They hadn't noticed the group of survivors yet, which would be considered amazing if Justin actually had time and courage to ponder it. Perhaps the bay was spacious enough and acoustics were accordingly dampened over that amount of distance, luck be had.

Ultimately, they weren't given away.

Inside the corridor, Chris squeezed his way past Gibson, who was still too shook up and exhausted to move much more than required to shift his burdensome weight.

Chris took two tentative steps to bring himself right behind Justin, eager to watch, yet mindful of his unique and precarious situation.

"Go ahead, boy." the Kaiser said from behind. "Go on, take a look around that corner."

"Don't do that." Justin warned.

But Chris' curiosity got the better of him, much as every time he was

in such proximity to Sergei.

The boy crept closer to the junction, his curiosity on overdrive. He stood on his toes to see over Reid's broad shoulders and leaned one eye out into the open.

A sea of parasites crawled, meandering their way about. Chris was fixated, studying the writhing mass. A nauseating stench made his nostrils flare as he watched a few of the larger zombie creatures teeming with unchecked ferocity, roaming about the length of the bay. They moved with no real direction, to no end. It was as if lack of movement meant hibernation or death for the alien horde—either pacing or gyrating where they stood.

"It's like they move as one." Chris mumbled aloud. "Like they're always together somehow."

The Kaiser himself pushed Gibson aside and peered out into the open after witnessing Chris' frozen posture, hovering over the boy. He took in the sight for merely a second. "Animals, kid. All of 'em. They'll kill you and everyone you know. It's what they do." Sergei turned to face those still aft in the corridor. "And I think everyone has realized that, yes?"

"Yes, they're animals." Gibson sighed. "That's one thing we'll all agree on. And we're gonna put them all down like sick, fucking animals. So what's up, Justin?"

Justin put his focus back into the open. He had attained a rough estimate on how many hostiles occupied the bay: more than they could deal with whether by direct action or subversion. He took one long, slow look at the Pelican caught in the middle of it all. It was beautiful. Not just the hard, angular lines of its warship credo that he used to know; it held a beauty far beyond just its appearance—|

It was salvation manifested. It was freedom.

"We can overcome this." Justin whispered. "The answer is...we're not _fucked, _Gibson."

"There's so many of them." Chris said.

"We've still got the stockyard. We can take these bastards. We just need a little more patience and we'll close out this fuckin' night right. Bullets do the job just fine, so we just need more guns and ammo. And the little ones seem to take others down with 'em when they're huddled in close."

"It is our only shot." Gibson said. "Better make out while it's still light outside or else we'll be waiting one more day, and between now and then..."

"Agreed." Justin swept his sights over the tide of aliens once more, his eye movements like that of a smothering blanket over a blazing inferno. "We're leaving. But we'll be back soon enough. We might even be airborne by sunset."

Before Justin could reach out to close the hatch, Chris placed a hand on Justin's forearm, clenching down on it quite firmly. Justin

glanced over his shoulder at the boy and was about to utter something profane, but he could not make eye contact with him; he didn't acknowledge Justin's irritated gaze, just stared into the bay and slightly upwards, a certain look about him. Justin actually had to search Chris' eyes they were so fixed on this one point so far beyond. Realizing whatever the boy was looking at couldn't be good, Justin slowly followed Chris' line of sight until he saw it too. Undoubtedly, this was why Chris remained perfectly motionless.

Some new kind of enemy was anchored to one of the support trusses very high above the bay's dead center. A wonder how Justin missed it earlier, he studied the general outline of it as only an extreme vantage could permit. He wished he could get closer, even just a few more meters would do. But he quickly denied that impulse. Not only would that risk getting maimed or killed, but also risk their element of surprise for the future.

Justin remembered he still had binoculars in his coat. He suppressed his brief excitement as best he could while slowly retrieving them, not even permitting the rustling of clothing as he brought them to bear in front of his eyes. He peered into them slowly, adjusting the controls. The object was now right in his face, some sort of cocoon. A fleshy, tan-colored sack bristling with bright-gold spikes from the end that was hanging downward.

"Whatâ€¦theâ€¦hell?" Justin whispered.

"What is that?" Chris asked, terror in both his voice and in his gripâ€¦now latched to the door frame.

Justin glanced back, utter confusion in his eyes. "No idea."

"Maybe it's an egg-makerâ€¦or something."

"Picture needs sharpening." Justin mumbled.

Justin looked back into the bay and refocused the binoculars at that grotesque thing hanging high above. He configured max zoom and tried to study it. Just then, some fleshy aperture opened on it, exposing a pinkish-red pouch that seemed to pulsate rather organically. Justin squinted, wondering what this thing was all about and what purpose it served among the alien colony. He would find out in about two seconds.

Its whole, grotesque body shivered violently where it hung. A green column of pure, liquid disgust lanced straight towards the hatch with unbelievable velocity. Unbeknownst to Justin, the glob instantly morphed in mid-flight into an incredibly sharp javelin of pure Calcium. Justin tried to react, tried to get out of the way, but before he could close the hatch the shot grazed his shin bone and blood spurted all over the cold steel surroundings.

Justin's face swelled as he silently winced away the pain, gently closing the hatch despite a burning agony in his leg. Inside the corridor with the hatch now closed, he yelled, "Seal the God damned fucking door!"

Chris and Gibson rushed forth, rotating the lock while Justin rolled on the ground and screamed all manner of expletives into the sound-proof confines.

After the two ensured the corridor was sealed and after Justin had managed to put enough pressure on his wound, he stopped cursing. He pushed off the ground, bent over and kept his hands over his bloody skin. "Someone, give me something to cover this up!"

Ken instantly stripped his jacket and sweater, then his undershirt. "Here." he said, handing it over to Justin.

Justin snatched the improvised tourniquet and wrapped it over and under the sight of the wound, suppressing some of his blood flow to that area. "C'mon. Let's go topside. First, the med facility and then the stockyard."

"Make sure you get some antiseptic." Gibson added. "That thing could get infected."

"It just better not be poisonous." Justin stood up and gained his balanced on one leg, then gaited over to the hatch and placed a firm, bloodied hand on Chris' shoulder and pushed him further into the corridor. "Outta the way."

The Kaiser and Chris backpedaled as Justin doubled back toward them and the entrance after silently sealing the hatch by his own good measure, torqueing the seal with all his strength. He then reached into his coat and pulled out his empty shotgun, wedging the barrel in between two steel spokes of the locking wheel. He gave the lock a quarter-rotation the other way to check his work; the wooden butt stock gently clanged against the frame, locking the wheel in position.

"Nothing's getting through there, c'mon."

Justin marched with a slight limp back towards the maintenance bay, everyone else following.

* * *

><p>After the short walk through the interconnecting corridor, the survivors regrouped in the maintenance bay, the familiar sight of the MAGLEV tram prevailing in the distanceâ€”still operational. Cars steadily came and went, halting briefly at one of the loading platforms before turning around 180 degrees for another loop. An endless cycle as the cars traversed antiquated passageways of the city.<p>

Justin unraveled his bandage just a little to inspect how much damage his leg tissue had taken. Hendricksson bent down next to him. "I'm not a medical expert, but I'd say it's already clotting nicely."

"Yeah, Joe, I'm aware of that." Justin stood back up.

"Well, like Gibson said, just get some ointment and a new bandage and you'll be fine."

Justin paid no more attention to Hendricksson. "Gibson, what are we waiting around for? Let's get going."

"Sorry, Justin. I was just making sure that you were ready." Gibson

gaited over towards a loading deck, ascended a ladder and approached another hatch three meters above the maintenance floor. "It's this way, everyone!" he said, his voice echoing in the ambience.

Everyone followed and once again met at the threshold to yet another hatch, the next corridor beckoning on the other side. Gibson and Justin once again had a go at the rotary lock, breaking the seal and opening the door. "It's clear." Gibson announced. "Let's go to the infirmary first for Justin."

Gibson entered, followed by Justin, then Joe Bill and Chris, Kaiser and his men holding the middle of the single-file formation. Ken and Layla were at the rear, who together re-sealed the hatch behind them.

Gibson waited for them. Once they were caught up, he resumed his step through the tight hallway. "Just another fifty meters, everyone. This maintenance tunnel leads to a telecom room off one of the utility closets, which is in the corner of the factory you all work in. Used to work in."

"Oh my God!" Layla shouted.

"What?" Gibson asked.

"That smell. What the hell. You don't smell that?"

"I don't smell anything!" Gibson shouted back.

From the middle of the group, the Kaiser softly said, "Sorry."

"That is disgusting." Layla scolded. "Honestly, you couldn't have held that a little longer?"

"I never hold back. If you hold farts back, they travel up the spine, to the brain, and that's where shitty ideas come from." he smiled.

"Not funny!" she retorted.

"Alright!" Justin shouted. "Enough of the joking around. We've got a mission to carry out. Our lives depend on it. Let's get going, and stay focused!"

Gibson turned around and kept going as Justin pushed him forward.

Another moment of walking and they were face to face with another hatch at the end to the tunnel. Justin and Gibson procedurally unlocked it, walking through and proceeding into a place a little more spacious. The putrid smell of Kaiser's gastric distention was gone and everyone could breathe a little easier. All around the walls were rack-mounted equipment chasses bolted to the concrete deck. LED status indicators blinked all around them as the equipment performed whatever functions they were designed for—undoubtedly to handle fiber optic communications tasks for the city's CCTV network. The survivor collective didn't stare too long at their surroundings and simply regarded the electronics once before they followed Gibson and Justin to the door on the far side of the room.

Gibson keyed a control on his datapad and a deadbolt inside the door retracting away from the door frame was audible an instant later. Gibson reached out, grabbed the door knob and pushed it open, a groaning noise resounding through the way beyond. What was next came as a surprise to everyone.

The groaning noise was simply a wooden pallet scraping against the floor as the door shoved it clear. Surrounding the view in front were shelves of ordinary cleaning supplies. Industrial-grade solvents and human sanitization products. There were mop buckets on wheels, brooms, dust pans, towels, floor wax and anything else a standard utility closet had.

"Hot damn." Justin said. "I used to go in here all the time whenever there was a spill on the floor. You were hiding the underworld right under our noses. Sneaky, clever bastard."

"The last place anyone would think to look if they were to try and find some dirt on me." Gibson sneered.

"I got low friends in high places."

"C'mon," Gibson egged, "let's not linger around. We've got to get you some medical care so we can get to the ammunition."

Gibson instantly broke out into a light jog, everyone behind somewhat amazed at how brisk a pace he could carry even after all the walking.

"Stop for a minute." Justin said emphatically, holding up a hand. He waited for Gibson to slow down and turn, which he did with an impatient frown. "We can't just barge in there. We know only vaguely that they're not in this sector, so let's go about this carefully...and slowly. And before we go again, you all need to prepare yourselves. Blood, bodies, the smell of death. This is what you may be walking in to. You need to control your normal reactions if you're weak in the stomach, okay?" Justin looked at every face. "Just know you might walk into it, accept it, deal with it appropriately. Don't fuck up my chances of survival or I'll kill you before they do. That goes for all of you. Now, go ahead."

Gibson nodded solemnly and slowly pivoted to the task.

Justin was right.

As entering the brightness of the factory floor always did, a familiarity gripped all those who spent much of their daily lives there. Working in the factory was a dull, dreary existence that people usually loathed but nevertheless got used to. It was unchanging, steady, predictable. Comforting, in a way.

Now, however, much of the very same walls that surrounded their routine activities were bathed in human gore. It wasn't an easy thing to traverse the main bay again. Littering the factory floor were toppled pieces of equipment and smears of blood from the earlier massacre, which all of them had witnessed first hand in one way or another. Chris quickened his pace so as to remain in the dead center of the pack, the notion of high-stepping through a Hellish minefield in his mind with all the recent horrors plastered to every surface around him.

Justin may've sensed what was going through some of their heads.

"Keep your eyes straight ahead and keep on the lookout for the aliens."

They all passed up the break rooms to their left, soon reaching the end of the factory floor where a corridor to the chow hall was.

They each rocketed down the corridor behind Gibson, the sanitization sinks off to either side marked with the occasional wash of blood. Justin could picture the workers running away from the carnage, being chased down by some unknown horde of monsters—a few of them getting lucky and pulverizing their hard-earned prey. Or maybe they were smart and let the little ones take them over to increase their numbers.

The chow hall loomed ahead, a gloomy ambience about it with no lights on—which were _always _on.

Toppled chairs and spilled food items and silverware were everywhere, giving indicating that a futile battle took place here. More like a last stand by the looks of it. There were no carcasses or entrails of the enemy lying about. Just bloody boot prints everywhere in chaotic arrangement.

Gibson automatically slowed down. "Everyone keep quiet." he whispered as everyone neared him.

The admin gaited slowly inward with the leather of two-toned loafers creaking under his weight. He saw a flickering light ahead through a set of double glass doors.

"The infirmary." Gibson again whispered. "Be ready to run the other way if I signal it."

They all advanced.

Gibson smartly pushed open one of the plexiplate doors, praying the hinges were in good upkeep. Even the slightest noise was unwanted. He held it open until Justin took its weight, passing it to the next survivor, and so on.

The last two in, Ken and Layla proceeded through the partition and let the door slowly close to its resting position.

"Justin," Gibson whispered, "me and you. Let's go check it out."

Justin nodded and they disappeared from the group just around the first corner.

At the rear of their formation, Ken took the opportunity to check their six. Slowly, he turned around and peered through the plexi-plate doors: all clear. Nothing but the smell of death and the predominant color of red spread out over the rows of tables and toppled chairs.

Ken trained his eyes that way, glued them in that direction as he

flipped long locks of blonde hair from his face. He could do nothing but wait. There were no sounds, the air deathly still in the infirmary lobby, so it was of some reassurance that Justin and Gibson were doing the right thingâ€|so far.

A moment later and only Justin's visage appeared around the corner. He waved. _All clear._

Everyone proceeded further inward, Ken still intent on keeping a vigil behind.

* * *

><p>"How's that? That better?" Joe asked.<p>

"I was fine before, Joe." Justin said. "It just stings a little less now."

"You're welcome." Joe replied, leaving the E-R.

Justin scooted himself off the operating table and planted his feet back on the ground, bending over to roll his pant leg back over his bandaged shin. "Thanks." Justin shouted.

There was no reply.

* * *

><p>Chris once again ventured by himself. He made it to the lobby where Ken maintained his guard. Chris checked the reception area for anything of useâ€supplies or information. There were logs and journal entries on various flat-panel displays and datapads strewn about the desktops, but blood smeared them all as well as the chairs. Chris didn't bother to investigate any further.<p>

Sergei's voice startled him. "Just wanna say I think you're doing a good job at keeping our plan intact. Good job on keeping up the pretense that I'm still an evil bastard and so forth."

"Not hard for me."

Sergei gave Chris an wary glance for an instant, then briefly eyed the doors in the same manner, now whispering, "Let's just hope the bastard, Ken, doesn't go exposing us to Justin. Now, Bill, I'm pretty sure he won't speak a wordâ€"

"â€Ken's not a bastard, he's a good guy."

"But he won't be such a good guy to any of us if he squanders our only hope outta here, eh? If Justin gets word about the true origins of this plan, whether from Ken or Bill or anyone else, you can call it quits at that point. Trust me."

"I won't let that happen. Even if it does, surely Justin has thought about it so far. He's realized that it's our ticket outta here."

"You've got blind optimism. Trust me, it goes well at first but then something ruins it all. No good deed goes unpunished, Chris, and you'll learn that as you age. I told you, if they see I've had any

part in it they will discredit it immediately. They'll just think I'm scheming again."

"Well, are you?"

"I thought we saw each other eye to eye, Chris. Are you doubting this?"

"I'm with you so far, but they're my friends too, so don't expect me to just hang on your coat tails everywhere you go. And let's face it, Sergei, the odds are stacked against you."

"How so? You know the details of the plan and we can see them all done as long as we're working together."

"Not just all that. The people you're asking me to convince think you're just as much an enemy as those spider bastards out there. They're only keeping you around because you're another set of eyes and trigger fingers. You can't count on them."

"Exactly! Which is why you need to keep playing the middle man."

"But there's so much more. Look at what I'll be asking of them. Loss of mobility, confined in a city that's already been taken, waiting on parts, installing one of the most complex devices I've ever heard about into a flying tin can...It's so much."

Has anyone else been speaking with you lately? Earlier you were all in, now you're thinking about running for the hills?"

No, I want to get outta here, but I'm not so sure you'll still be on my side when we _are _finally outta here."

"Now what good would it do me to double-cross you?"

"That's how these things work with people like you, right? There's no more need for me when we're up in the air, and then I'm gone."

Kaiser Sergei bent down and looked Chris square in the eye, a subtle fire in his eyes as he spoke.

"I give you my word, and I don't just give out my word on a whim, that I will not leave you behind."

"I think I believe you, and I want to believe you, but what about my friends? Will you promise to let them live as well?"

"That choice is entirely up to them. Live and let live is how I see this now that I've given you my vow. So maybe you can do some more convincing when the time comes."

"I will honor it, Sergei. The world needs a change. We need a change I know you know that. We can start now, with you and me."

The Kaiser stood up to full height. "That's what I've believed this whole time."

* * *

><p>Justin made to leave for the door, but strangely he stopped just short of it as he caught a glimpse of his own face in the mirror right above the sink. He remained there. For the first time in many years, he liked what he saw. There was no shame in his eyes. And they were radiant. It didn't make any sense.<p>

Right before Justin could ponder why, Ken showed up at the door. The look in the ex-aviator's eyes was anything but cheerful. "What's the news?" Justin asked.

Ken stepped in and gently closed the door, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. He then took long and slow strides over to the chair.

"Gibson told me about your plan to get rid of the Kaiser. Told me you'd need me for it."

"So what's your verdict?"

"Well, it's gonna be awfully hard to do that if they're packing as much heat as us."

"It's a risk we'll be forced to take. Once we have a Pelican in our possession, we're not gonna need him anymoreâ€|and he knows that. And then there's the flipside: he won't need us either. Hijacking that bird is on his mind, I just know it. We're left with no choice, Ken."

Ken sighed. "I guess I kinda figured that all along too."

"Is that all then?"

"No. When we do it, we have to do it right. Chris and Layla shouldn't see it happen. Bill too, if we can."

"Salvaging luxury now, are we? We're gonna do this however we do it, that's that. We can't cater to their virgin eyes; the Kaiser is thinking the same thing we are; he's gonna pull it before we do if he gets the opportunity. We just have to strike first. Strike first, strike fast, strike hard. I need you with me."

Ken clenched his jaw, his anxiety in the matter now palpable. "Okay. Fuck it. If we have to do it then we do it. Just let me know when."

"Another thing."

"What?"

"We need Joe too. You and Bill have been talking to him. You've built up a friendship. Talk to him some more."

"Okay."

Ken stood up, strode to the door and walked out with not even the slightest hint of hesitation in his step. As if on cue, Chris showed up. He rapped a knuckle on the door frame out in the hall.

"What's up, kid?"

"Not much. Ken says it's safe out there, so I just wanted to see how your cut is. Is the pain gone?"

"Yeah, Hendricksson took care of me. Gave me some cortisone and some micro-morphs. Not exactly one-hundred and ten percent, but I'm ship-shape."

"Bet you wish you had some of that standard issue biofoam, eh?"

"Fuck yes I do. Biofoam is the best thing since Alt Burgundy. Got a snake bite? Flush it out with some biofoam. Fall off a five-story building and your rib cage is split open? Throw some biofoam in there. Wife left you and you ran outta Jim Beam? Pour two fingers of biofoam in a shot glass andâ€"

"â€"I get the point, Justin."

"Right."

"So you're okay then?"

"Like I saidâ€|ship-shape."

"Cool. Good." Chris glanced down each length of the hallway. "I'm gonna go find some soda or something. You want some?"

"Nah, but wait. Come in and sit down for a minute. Now that we've got some chill time, let me apologize for some things."

"Apologize for what things?"

"Taking your idea for granted. Not giving you the respect you deserve."

"What are you doing this for now?"

"I've been putting things into perspective lately. Looking back, it just feels like the right thing to do."

"Should I be scared? Is this what Bill would call Last Rights, or something like that?"

Justin chuckled and beamed at Chris. "Nah, kid. Nothing bad is going to happen. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Seeâ€|every once in a while, something good comes along and helps you see things clearer. Here, take a smoke."

"No thanks, it makes my throat burn."

"You've smoked up with me before. You decide to quit early or something?"

"I just smoked up with you guys to break the ice. I never really liked it."

"Suit yourself."

Just lit up.

"So what's the rare occasion, Justin?"

The ex-Marine took a savory pull on the filter, deep and slow. "Remember that day I told you surviving is as good as it gets?"

"That was my first day here and I'll never forget that."

"Well, I was wrong about that."

"I know that look. You're talking about Layla."

Justin grinned.

Chris took a seat on a doctor's stool near the sink and smirked. "I don't think I've ever seen you smile like that, Justin. Are you in danger of developing humanity again?"

"Funny, isn't it? How a woman can change you in an instant?"

"They do that. Every now and again, it's a good thing."

"And I realize I haven't treated you well lately."

"_Lately?_"

"Okay, I know I've never been terribly kind to you. You'll get no more apologies from meâ€"

"â€"Apology accepted!" Chris laughed.

"Okay then. Hatchet buried?"

"Six feet deep."

"Alright, let's get outta here and take care of business."

"On your lead, Justin."

Together, smiling, Chris and Justin rounded up the other survivors so that they could head to the stockyard.

* * *

><p>There was no access to the exterior from where the infirmary was, and thus they couldn't get to the stockyard just yet. They were at a dead end with no choice but to double back. Only once they were far enough as the transition between the chow hall and the factory could they begin to think about exiting the Northeastern complex. This meant laboring through the sickening blood-mural confines.<p>

The walk was nauseating. One step out the infirmary and the smell of stale, dried up blood and bile woke up everyone's nostrils. The floor had patches of it everywhere, the toppled chairs were coated in it, and the tables were smeared with all variety of human gore. Food and drink were splattered about in kind. Hard-earned meals cut short like their lives. Not one alien casualty had been inflicted. It was by no means a fair fight. It was a massacre, city-wide.

But at least for once it wasn't resultant of fratricide, a trend that had become all too common among denizens living on Traxus IX.

Justin halted briefly and stood in thought.

"Chris, Ken, and Gibson: grab all the food and drink you can carry off that conveyor line. We're gonna need it."

Justin took a few steps just a little further to where the chow hall met the long corridor full of wash stations. He peered off into the distance where the threshold to the factory floor beckoned. There was nothing in sight.

Justin looked back on the group.

"Gibson, I said grab all the food you can."

"I'm not eating those peasant scraps."

"It's not just for you, asshole. Everyone's gonna need it."

"I'm carrying my own snacks in my pockets. Don't ask me to fetch food for others. I'll wait until I can get at real food again. Shouldn't be much longer anyway."

With that, the admin reached deep into his trousers, retrieving a creme-filled pastry. He clawed fervently at the wrapper after taking stock of his surroundings in this brief pause, and wolfed the whole treat down in a single gulp.

"Fuck, do you even chew?" Justin took stock of the area as well. "Alright, everyone, take what you can and eat on the go. But keep your eyes open."

Justin waited there while the others finished packing their provisions. Another moment and he led them on the move again, treading lightly through the sanitization corridor.

All that was visible were bright splotches of red across sinks. It was all a distraction; the only sight to be concerned with was dead ahead: the door to the factory. Justin slowly shoved it open and scanned the bay. Nothing had changed since their visit. It was devoid of people or aliens. It was still bright as ever and the conveyors still moved with a soft whirring sound, churning up fresh workloads of scrap and minerals—waiting to be properly sorted so that by the time the materials ran the length of the bay and proceeded back underground again, the foundry workers below could smelt them down and pour them into ingots, assemble them into something that could yield profits for THI. It was as if someone should be manning the line right now.

The sight was disheartening.

"C'mon," Justin softly ordered, "no stopping."

A small personnel door lied only a few meters away. Justin bee-lined straight towards it, the other survivors in close pursuit. He pulled it open and a cold, choppy air whisked inward along with muted sun. Justin looked around: surprisingly, it was barren just like the

factory. No people or aliens, either dead or living. No bodies.

Just more smears of blood, spent brass casings and a few toppled and charred vehicle frames.

"The aftermath of your handy work." Justin said to Layla.

"Hell's half mile." Joe added.

"There's still one vehicle out there." Ken said. "It looks like it's still good."

"One vehicle is no good to us." Justin said. "Can't fit everyone and it would make too much noise anyway. C'mon, let's keep moving. Daylight won't last much longer."

With that, everyone brought in closer to Justin as he pressed towards the tunnel burrowing under the towering spire. The dusty winds swirled around its girth and carried on over the courtyard. Justin looked all around them as he tracked a trough of dust moving overhead. The courtyard was totally devoid of life or death. "Keep your eyes and your ears open." he said as they entered the mouth of the tunnel.

The darkness swallowed them.

* * *

><p>Each of the survivors had silently thanked whatever they believed in that they made it through the tunnel alive and in one peace as they neared the stockyard. A subtle, pale-yellow glow emanated from that direction, the light of day transitioning them onward again. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust. Chain link fencing was now visible on either side, rows and rows of padlocked partitions. But the group of survivors was not alone. A faint rustling of chain link was overtly audible as they progressed deeper in.<p>

Justin once again reached into his coat for his shotgun, then cursed himself an instant later for realizing he used it as an improvised lock at the corridor to the Pelican. But, no, that was an utter necessity. "Who's got a shotgun?"

Ken stepped forth and handed one to Justin, who immediately advanced deeper inward, hoping that there mere sight of it would be deterrent enough. Hopefully, the zombies and parasites learned from their comrades' encounters with human weaponry. But soon enough, Justin would find no need for it.

A few more steps accomplished and everyone could make out exactly what was causing the ruckus.

The Kaiser and his men broke position and sped to the location of the disturbance. By the time Justin and everyone else caught up with them, all was clear now.

The two thugs that Justin had locked up earlier were still in the same place and very much angry. Tired, hungry and weak, no doubt. Probably very uncomfortable and cold.

"It would've been more humane just to kill them." Sergei barked.

"I thought they would've had the sense to find a way out." Justin fired back. "Guess you don't employ quality help these days."

"Get them out."

"Right. I free them, and then there's two more scumbags with grudges against Justin Reid. No thanks."

"Justin." Bill said, approaching his side. "It's not right to just leave them here. They'll freeze to death like this. I don't even know how they made it this far."

"I agree." Chris added. "It's not right. They're extra guns if we let them join us, eh? And everyone knows we need that. I think you should free them, it'd be a sign of good faith. What if you were in their shoes?"

Justin looked among the group. As he passed his sights upon Joe, Ken and Layla, each of them nodded in accordance with Bill and Chris' plea. For the first time, Justin was on the wrong side of reason. The entire group was against him on this, and there was no choice but to conform. For if he didn't, it would mean loss of faith in the leader. Not total, but just enough. That's all it would take for his thread of control to slowly unravel. It wouldn't be the end but it would plant a seed in everyone's mind that he was unfit to lead. He had to appease the masses, at least temporarily. "I wouldn't be in their shoes because I'm not a piece of shit like them." Justin responded. "I hope you all know what you're doing." He pointed squarely at the Kaiser. "Because once we kill all the aliens, he becomes the enemy. More of him is gonna make our situation more difficult."

"No one asked you, working man." the Kaiser shot back.

"Oh c'mon, Kaiser!" Chris shouted unexpectedly, stepping in close. "To think that you're some kind of fucking leader? You ain't."

And Sergei responded, "The majority of this group says to open the damned door, so let's just do that and be done with it!"

Justin retrieved the key from deep within his coat, almost forgetting it was still there. He merely inserted the key into the padlock and walked away.

The Kaiser diligently stepping forth to finish the job. "And you thought I was an animal." he said, sliding the door open. "It's you we should all be worried about."

Sergei shook the hands of both his men and patted them on the back as the rest of his cohorts were reunited.

Justin shook his head. "This is all very touching, but we need to search for ammo. Everyone take a row. And take whatever you think will be necessary to live on for at least five days. And don't forget smokes and alcohol."

Everyone had finished packing their own private arsenal as well as their own private stock of luxuries.

Justin sealed and pocketed a flask of malt liquor just after taking a

satisfying gulp of it. He looked around as the liquid warmed his insides: already, all eyes were on him. A silent query for his next move.

"To the hangar." Justin said flatly.

* * *

><p>With spirits raised, everyone followed Justin out of the stockyard.<p>

It was a cold walk out of the Eastern tunnel. The fact that much of the journey was through pitch-black darkness didn't seem to faze any of them. They were armed to the teeth and laden with substances to calm their nerves and bolster their confidence—“as if the amount of firepower alone couldn't have done that. Once in the full light of the courtyard, a cloud of dust sailed on the open winds, enveloping them all in a suffocating barrage of fine debris. The gusts suddenly changed direction and the dust cloud lost cohesion and dissipated. Justin looked around once again: no change at all to the scene. "Gibson, you're back in the lead again."

"Right." Gibson responded. "Same place we came through." he announced.

With that, the small group diverted straight towards the factory bay doors. Gibson wasted no time and hurried through. Everyone smartly followed. As if on autopilot, Gibson paced to the corner of the factory floor, not too far from where they all entered. He opened the storage closet and waited there for merely a few seconds. Everyone was in. He closed the door behind them just to be safe. He then unlocked the door partially hidden behind the wooden pallets and opened it. "Let's not waste any time."

The group had once again convened inside the underground loading bay after an arduous journey through the narrow corridor. Unlike last time, however, none of them sat around or conversed with idle chit-chat. Each person immediately prepared themselves. Not a single word was uttered as everyone checked their weapons, fed ammunition into clips, holstered a sidearm or two, anchored Molotov Cocktails to their torsos and chambered rounds into their primary weapons. The bay was just one echo after another, metallic clicks and snaps as everyone readied their weaponry.

"Aim center mass." Justin said. "Zombies die first, then parasites unless your situation dictates otherwise. We'll pick as many off from the hatchway as we can. If we go out into the open, we cover by twos. Does anyone here _not _know what that means?"

Chris raised his hand.

"It means two people will advance, fire everything they got, then fall back behind the rest of the formation. As that happens, two more will fill their place. That means fresh trigger fingers and fresh ammo. We can't afford to let these bastards catch us off guard." Justin now addressed everyone. "We've scavenged all the stockyard's weapons and ammo for this little stunt. There's no going back. This is it."

Chris took a deep breath.

"You good?" Justin's brow raised.

"I'm good."

"I take it that everyone else is good too." Justin stated. He turned towards the last corridor. "Follow me."

Justin walked briskly towards the hatch. He didn't hesitate one microsecond, eager to get it over with: he snapped the seal loose and flowed right into free-wheeling the lock. The dog ears inched away from the frame as he sped the dial counterclockwise. An instant later he kicked in the door with a swift boot and strode inward, heavily intented and no longer favoring his wounded leg.

The red lights cast a soft, warming glow on the surfaces of their hoisted weapons as they all swept through the corridor. The group tried to stay in step with Justin as he broke out into a fast walk. He arrived at the other end in merely a few seconds.

"Maybe we should slow down." Ken suggested as they all halted at the final hatch.

"I'm trying to get you motivated. We're about to enter the toughest battle of our lives. If we don't get this right, we _are _screwed." Justin snatched his old shotgun out of the door's locking wheel and started feeding shells into the receiver. He pumped it once, racking a round into the chamber, then fed another round into the receiver, mindful to leave the safety on until he needed to fire. He slid the shotgun into his coat, then instantly started free-wheeling the lock. "We have to hit them fast and hard. Now!"

Justin kicked open the door and was met with the sight of parasites crawling over the bay floor about fifty meters out, past all the shelves and work benches. He took sight with a pistol and began firing immediately. Just as quickly as he fired off the first shot, Ken pulled up beside him and dug in too. The entire alien horde was now alerted and began scurrying towards them, small plumes of dust in their skittering wake.

Justin fired off two rounds into the closest alien, not taking any chances, racking and stacking his targets in order of proximity. Immediately, two of the crawling variety exploded into fleshy ribbons of moist disgust while two or three beside them burst as well. With the closest line of parasites destroyed, he raised his sight a little higher and unloaded the rest of the clip into a humanoid lurking farther out. He scored hits in a closely-grouped area right around the sternum, saving two bullets for head shots right as it toppled to the ground. "Reloading!" Justin shouted.

He fell back into the corridor. Ken's firearm produced a tell-tale click alongside him. "Reloading!"

Chris and Joe ran up to replace them. The firing resumed, concussive waves almost deafening everyone inside the corridor as the shots were placed not too far outside. The hordes of creatures kept advancing, a surprise that none of the larger variety had reared their way yet. Justin peered beyond the strobing silhouettes of Chris and Joe as they fired and noted that the zombies were somehow kept at bay beyond the mass of critters before their feet.

Justin turned around to face everyone still inside, swapping out clips as he spoke. "The larger zombies aren't coming yet because they'd trample the smaller ones—so save a good deal of buckshot for them!"

The firing subsided. "Out!" Chris shouted.

"Out!" Joe echoed.

The two fell back, and Kaiser and Jaggo stepped forth into the bay.

By now, there was a steadily-increasing puddle of yellow puss and bony tentacle soaking into the floor outside the hatch, but the parasite mass continued to execute tiered advances despite the overwhelming amount of staggered firepower. Justin wisely and dutifully kept the surprise element and it played perfectly into this gunfight. There wasn't a conceivable way the aliens could overcome the survivors at this rate. The waves of enemies couldn't gain enough ground to come within striking distance thus far into the battle as scores were destroyed in seconds from semi-automatic gunfire. As if to accentuate that fact, the Kaiser unlimbered an MA5 series assault rifle from his coat, switching the safety off with a wide smile. He swept the fully automatic weapon low and from side to side like an all-pervading fire extinguisher, the muzzle spitting out partially-arrested flame and a hail of steel-jacketed bullets. Halfway through the clip, he yelled savagely like an alpha male warding off territorial contestants while his subordinate inflicted what damage he could with a pistol. Realizing that having one working eye wouldn't allow for decent awareness, Jaggo holstered it and began firing an assault rifle just like his leader—in low and wide arcs, hoping his meager efforts paid off. Regardless of how combat-ineffective he was, he and Sergei made quite the fireteam: most enemy casualties would be created by them.

But as the smaller creatures diminished, the larger zombies so too advanced with the dwindling surprise and gap of safety. They immediately took advantage of the extra maneuvering space and their heightened resistance to damage.

Justin took notice, stepped over the partition and joined the two in the fight.

"I'm out!" cried Jaggo.

"Same here." Sergei said.

Layla and Ken stepped forth alongside Justin now, all of them realizing the shift in battle taking place. Layla saw the new waves of aliens advancing faster as the collective thinned from so much devastation, more and more of the faster and tougher creatures blitzing their line. She rightly switched her grip from pistol to shotgun, flicking the safety tab to show a forewarning red dot. Once such monstrosity ran for her with unbelievable speed. A wonder to even herself, she maintained her composure and waited for the alien to come within point-blank range where her present weapon truly performed. Her team stood with her and she would not falter. It was right upon her when she squeezed the trigger.

She staggered back a meter from its recoil, the large weapon almost falling from her grasp. Her carpels tingled with pain but she held on and picked her head up to see what lied before her: the zombie's figure totally pulverized and motionless on the puss-soaked floor. She smiled, instantly searching for more targets. There were plenty to choose from.

Ten more zombies lurking in the far shadows just replaced the one she dispatched, the remaining horde now free to traverse the space between them and the Pelican. But the survivors could never have predicted what was now developing: they watched in an adversarial sort of admirationâ€”a battle-induced respectâ€”as a few zombies lost their hosts' footing over the gore-slickened floor, recovering balance and cautiously slipping into retreat. The smaller variety had already attained great distance from the humans, calculating their odds at survival against such teamwork.

"Smart little buggers." the Kaiser said as he slapped a new magazine into the rifle's receiver.

At this point, all the survivors had attained an unexpected air of courage and had amassed into the open beyond the threshold, which suddenly grew quiet as each human reloaded for the next wave. A momentary standoff occurred between the two sides as Justin and those with him were fully ready for the next moveâ€”whoever should make it. Everyone was locked and loaded with absolutely no shortage of ammunition in sight. No one had even used an improvised incendiary device yet. And the alien horde must've realized the turning of the tide. They had their backs to the other wallâ€”clear on the other side of the bayâ€”practically donating the Pelican to them.

With a triumphant smile, Justin took his time reloading, sporadically glancing up at the aliens in the far distance. He took a deep breath after racking a shotgun round. His gaze hardened in determination as he slowly advanced.

Everyone followed. The last march.

About mid ways into the bay, Justin froze.

"Oh shit."

"What?" Ken asked, glancing sidelong at him.

Justin's jaw slackened as he gazed up. "It's gone."

"What is? Oh shit, the thing!"

"Fuck! I forgot all about it!" Justin glanced his aim in random directions, looking for the prime targetâ€”nowhere to be found but undoubtedly stalking them this very instant. He hollered at the top of his lungs, "Everyone, run to the Pelican, now!"

They lowered their aim and pumped their legs in vain, and before anyone could build up enough speed...there it was.

The unseen alien dropped to the floor right in front of them, no longer the fleshy cocoon it was prior.

Presently, it took the form of a giant arachnid, so unlike the rest

of the smaller parasites further away. This one was bigger, much bigger, as big as a human. It was darker and slimier than the others and its symmetry was both disgusting and menacing, the anterior extremities jointed in such a way that they dove forward. No doubt, it was powerful despite its malformed limbs. It slowly rose to its walking height after its plummet from the ceiling, seemingly unperturbed by the thirty-meter fall. It slowly observed them for a moment through compound eyes, Justin slowly backpedaling along with the rest of the group.

Faster than a human could detect, it lashed forward. Rather than going for Justin—who was arguably the closest—it instead struck at one of the Kaiser's men. A vicious swipe from one of its beefy legs put him down for good, a fatal gash in his chest that tore right through clothing and skin and muscle. The man could do nothing but bleed out.

As the monster briefly dashed backwards in mock retreat, picking another target, Justin opened fire with a shotgun. And everyone else copied. The bay became one, thunderous echo from so many rounds going off at once. It seemed as though they were wearing it down quickly, cutting through its tough, slimy hide. It was withering into where it stood, growing smaller by the second.

It pulsed violently. Common logic would've suggested it was done for, but new organs and tissue sprouted outwards from its insides. Justin ceased firing in awe. The bay got quiet as everyone mirrored his move.

The creature morphed, instantly doubling in size, then redoubled, its many legs pulling inward on itself and sprouting out new limbs seconds later. It grew distinct sections of what could pass for a humanoid body. Abdomen, torso, head, legs, arms. Almost like the zombies lingering in the background themselves. The dark skin of the arachnid-like being just a few seconds ago now tinged an off-white, slimier than ever and swelling with striated muscle. When it was done transforming into this new being, it stood taller than any of them. A large, gaping mouth towered over them and seemed to suck in their collective gaze. It instantly moved upon the survivors.

"Head shots!" Justin shouted.

The crowd broke out again with a full onslaught of buckshot as they backpedaled and lost ground. None of the rounds seemed to faze it at first. But even if they did, it didn't matter; the gargantuan zombie lumbering down on them placed one of its huge forelimbs over its grotesque face, shieling it completely. It didn't even stagger back from the multitude of blows on the body either. Luckily it was a slow mover, but everyone assumed it could not withstand such firepower and began to stand firm. They underestimated this new enemy.

Figuring it could not withstand a point-blank shot, one of the Kaiser's men was swept off his feet by an elongated limb of the hulking zombie. Not even taking its gaze off the rest of the crowd, the limb then crashed down upon his torso with a wet _crack!_

He was gone.

In rage, another one of the Kaiser's men stepped forth and grabbed a hold of a Molotov Cocktail, lit it up, but before he could hurl it at

the enemy's feet, another elongated limb slashed at his waist. A section of his stomach opened up a second later, blood, bile and what was presumably the man's spleen leaking onto the epoxy-resin floor. The flaming bottle was next to land and cracked open, engulfing the mortally-wounded criminal-soldier in flame.

"Keep your distance!" Justin ordered.

"What's the point of using shotguns?" Joe shouted back.

"Then use something else!"

Much of the group took Justin's advice. The remaining three of the Kaiser's men switched to their assault rifles, two of them now flanking the beast, vying for the revenge of their fallen brethren.

With humans on three sides of it, the monster was unsure where to strike as a hail of bullets impacted its tough skin from many angles. But its surface just seemed to absorb each round, no bodily fluids leaking outward. With a speed thought incapable from such a large body, all humans witnessed the zombie throw down one of its large limbs intended for one of the Kaiser's men. It cracked the ground right next to one of them. He barely dodged that blow; it would've flattened his body from head to toe like a pancake.

As the zombie focused elsewhere, the man on the other side took the opportunity and performed an amazingly brave and foolish thing: running up and jumping on its hunched back, digging in finger nails and climbing up the slickened spine. No one fired a shot. The tactic appeared feasible. But then one of the combat limbs instantly bent inward and pulled the man off its back with ease. Instead of destroying the man's body, it flung him clear across the bay. The impact on the far wall didn't kill him, but the host of zombies lingering there did.

Foolish enough to watch his friend's demise, the other thug also got his own. Captivated on the way the zombies killed in the distance, the larger one right in front of him dashed forth and clipped his head clean off with a devastating blow from its larger limb. No one, not even Justin could stand to watch the fountain of gore that erupted upwards from the headless man.

That left four dead in only two minutes.

At the end of their awe and courage, the group once again fired all they had while conceding the turf they'd wrested. The hulking beast advanced as fast as its large body could support it. Not one round of conventional weaponry would pierce its thick shell.

"Fall back!" Justin cried. "Fall back!"

Everyone blind fired as they backpedaled with all the speed they could muster. Thankfully for them, the being's current form was too large to sustain a sprint. It was a wonder it could even stand with such a high mass-to-height ratio.

Justin was the last in and expended all the rounds in his clip before sealing the door with pure haste. Loud wailing from the insuperable beast gradually gave way to steady droning that reverberated through

the steel walls. And the smell of heavy cordite wafted through the corridor, adding to the miasma inside.

"Well, Gibson, we are now officially fucked."

* * *

><p>After a few, agonizing minutes of listening through the hatch, everyone surmised the large zombie was staying put. Even if it possessed the strength to buckle the hatch, surely the dimensions of the corridor made it impossible for the superzombie to pass through.<p>

Gibson craned his neck high out of his jacket and wiped salty beads of sweat from his brow. "I have a plan." he announced.

Justin slumped to the ground right near the hatch. "Does it involve a nuclear weapon?"

"If we used a nuke, the Pelican would be done for."

"Oh, really?"

"Get serious, Justin!"

"I am fucking serious!"

"Everyone relax!" Chris shouted. "We're still alive! Let's start thinking of what we can do to keep it that way!"

Silence followed.

"Where'd you grow such strong leadership qualities?" The Kaiser asked.

"Look," Gibson said with calm, "I know of a secret weapons cache. I believe it contains the kind of firepower we need for this type of situation."

"_What _firepower?" Justin demanded.

"I'm talking rockets and chain guns, military hardware, the kind you can't buy at a DRMO sale."

"Fine, let's get to it." Justin instantly rose from his seat and took a stiff swig from his flask, a few drops dribbling down his stubble-covered chin and cascading to the deck. "When we get outside, everyone give me a rough count of how much ammo you have left. We'll set up a formation on the way to this stash of weapons. And Ken stays in the middle of that formation."

"You seem to be so intent on keeping him safe," the Kaiser said, "why do you keep saying that? What makes him more special than me?"

"Because Ken's the only one that knows how to fly."

"I see."

* * *

><p>The group went back the way they came.<p>

They all stopped at the MAGLEV rail.

"Me and Layla first." Justin said. "I don't care who goes next, just try not to kill each other."

Chris' mouth dropped. _Nice choice of words, Justin._

The next car came within the loading platform and Justin and Layla boarded. Within seconds, the car was out of sight.

As Ken and everyone else gazed into the tunnel for the next car, the Kaiser bent down to Chris and whispered, "It's a good thing Justin told me about Ken, you know. I might've had to silence himâ€|if you know what I mean."

Chris glared upwards.

"Relax, I'm just kidding." the Kaiser smiled. "How could I kill the only one capable of flying our Pelican? Sometimes you have to make fun of your own plight. Otherwise, you'll just go crazy like Justin."

"Whatever."

The next car approached. Gibson and Ken boarded, the group dwindling in size.

* * *

><p>The lights of the tunnel that the levitated car sped through whisked by the clear and bulbuous canopy, white streaks Doppler shifting closer, and then away. Caught in the middle of the light storm was Layla's beautiful face. Her gaze was pointed somewhere off to the side, fixed and perhaps not really looking at anything. The look in her eyes was easy to read: a mixture of fear and determination, wholly beautiful in that volatile state. Justin couldn't help himself from doing anything in this brief reprieve but simply staring into her eyes. A moment passed and Layla realized she'd been watched this whole time in the car.<p>

"Are you okay?" he asked her. "You didn't get hurt back there, did you?"

"A little too late to ask that now, isn't it?"

Justin was never adept at reading other people very well. He'd lost touch with people in general when things in the galaxy took a turn for the worse. Duties such as winning battles and keeping Marines alive were chief among his concerns. But when the next chapter of his life began at Traxus IX, he'd given up on people entirely. Each was a potential betrayal in the making, a risky investment. He'd put all faith in himself and the small band of servicemen still in his dwindling sphere. But in that moment in the car with Layla, he could sense her anger. The way her eyes bored into his own spoke volumes of her current opinion of him.

"I know. I'm sorry. If there wasn't so much shit going on, I'd only

have you to think of. Sergei is driving me up the wall."

Layla bolted from her seat and across the interior of the car towards Justin. Before he even knew why, her lips were pressed against his.

He sank deeper into the seat as her weight pressed down on him, her knees now on the bench seat, straddled around his waist.

She broke contact, breathed deep and stared into his eyes. "I know you have a lot to deal with."

Justin had no response.

Her sweat glands were active. The smell of her skin was seeping through her pores. The sweet, primitive scent drove him into a frenzy as he caressed her back. He longed for another kiss as the car slowed for their dismount.

* * *

><p>Justin and Layla waited, occasionally glancing at one another. Then it was them, Gibson and Ken. Soon after, it was the four of them and Chris and Bill. Next up was Kaiser and Jaggo. Finally, Joe arrived.<p>

"Let's move." Justin ordered.

He re-traced their steps through the corridor, the loud whir of old machinery once again filling their ears shortly before they emerged into the main tunnel. All was clear. "There better be some good weapons in this stash of yours, Gibson."

Justin wasted no time. He broke out into a light jog through the pitch-black, a muted light gradually seeping in from daylight ahead.

In roughly ten minutes, they emerged into the admin district, Gibson wholly out of breath. Justin looked back and scowled, though he kept his insults to himself. He rightly slowed a little so the admin could catch up, the man wheezing as his lungs cavitated, face red.

Justin stopped and waited for him to catch up. He waited yet another minute to allow him to get his breath again.

"You never told us where all these weapons are." He watched Gibson double over at the waist, a look of nausea in the admin's face. "Take your time and puke if you need to; I'm pretty sure every alien in existence is back in that bay." Justin scanned the admin district, satisfied with his last statement. "So where are we going?"

"It's in the mines." Gibson coughed. "That way." he pointed.

His outstretched finger was leveled dead ahead at the mine entrance where Hendricksson's ship had crashed, the bleach-white hull still resting there.

"Are you serious?" Justin asked.

"Dead serious."

"Fine, so be it. Let's go."

Justin walked rather than run for there was no way the admin could keep up a run. Since they were walking, Justin took the idle time to light a cigarette. He savored the flavor as he paced through the cold and brisk wind, the light of day soon set to fade maybe three hours from now. He didn't even bother to check his wristwatch because he knew: even if things went smoothly from here on outâ€"getting the weaponry they required and hoofing it back to the bayâ€"it would be dark before they could make it to the main tunnel. This meant they would have to stop somewhere for the night, ideally the admin building. It was a nuisance; Justin wanted nothing more than to get this over with and get airborne, make the jump to a better life. He still wasn't sure exactly when he should break the news to everyone that the Pelican was already capable of being their ticket off of Traxus IX. That was a mission for another day.

Ahead, the mouth of the cave beckoned.

* * *

><p>Justin reached the cave entrance, all the other survivors gradually approaching.<p>

Justin had been at this cave entrance twice before. Each time, his life had changed.

First, it was his chance encounter with what Solomon had referred to as Yellow Trumpet flower. When Justin and the others consumed it, all their lives had taken a back seat in a wild ride. Justin recalled each time the strange and horrid voice entered his conscious thereafter. Whoever, or _what_ever the voice belonged to, surely it was resultant of the potent flower; the onset of a homicidal voice hadn't been known to him until then.

But the timing was too tight in accordance with the emergence of the other unwelcome guest: the parasite. Then, of course, both occurrences claimed Peteâ€"simultaneously. It was all because of Justin's chance encounter with the flower in this cave in front of him.

The second time Justin's life had changed here was when Joe Hendricksson crash-landed. The whole occurrence was a combination of blind luck and logic-defying probability. Joe shouldn't have been allowed to live as long as he drifted, not to mention the harrowing ride down should've killed himâ€"amazing that he didn't even break one bone. Regardless of what kind of sophisticated restraint systems the craft had, it was a bloody miracle.

And now, venturing into the mines for [hopefully] the last time, Justin's life would change again.

"Alright, stay sharp. Don't let your mind wander down here. Stay frosty and this will pay off big. One final effort is all that remains. We get the weapons, we head back to the Pelican, we cut off the head of the snake."

Justin was no stranger to change. His life was wrought with it. He was perfectly fine with riding out one last change.

But he and everyone else had no Godly idea what horrors lied ahead of them, no idea at all.

â€|_**Into the Deep**_

28. Disbanding

**Disbanding**

Justin stood idle for a moment and assessed the entry way to the mine shaft.

Much of it was barred of passage due to Hendricksson's crash-landed ship, half of its nose protruding inwards. Justin considered it rather strange that he be required to lend scrutiny to the mine entrance now, for mere days ago he'd noticed that the ceiling had collapsed. In no time it was open again, though not by choice...by circumstance. Fate had intended Joe's arrival be right here.

So many rare occurrences were happening at once, Justin now realized.

Nothing like what was happening lately had any precedence, at least not since a decade when the tumultuous beginnings of Traxus IX took root and the denizens witnessed them literally take shape overnight.

_Something is happening to this world, _Solomon had said not even a week ago. He was definitely right. But what _was_ happening, exactly?

Justin figured not even Solomon could fathom.

And speak of the devilâ€|

"Justin!" Chris shouted from behind.

Justin turned around as he ran a hand over the vehicle's white hull, still pristine despite the eroding power of Traxus IX's dust and chemical-laden wind. "What?"

"Your pocket is blinking. I mean, there's a light going off in your pocket."

Justin looked down. "Oh shit. How long has it been doing that?" he said, deftly reaching for it.

"I don't know, but I only noticed it just now. Honest."

Justin reached in his pocket and retrieved a small, leather case in which a handheld radio was packed, one of two that Solomon had requested of him. Justin opened a pouch and unfolded a Whip Antenna. He then switched on the main amplifier.

Instantly, whoever was broadcasting on that frequency was audible.

"_Just'een. Come in. D'you read?"_

"Solomon. This is Justin. Hey, how's it going over there in Eden?"

"_Ver'ee good, mon. But how are you holding up?"_

Justin was about to key the radio for his response, but a strange impulse overrode that. Instead, with the microphone hovering over his mouth, he hesitated and glanced about. All around him, characters of all sorts lingered with various intentions that no one knew for certain. In front of him was another mission in a realm that harbored unknown dangers. And behind him was the most important and hellacious battle of his life just waiting for him to return should he work up the courage.

"Could be better."

"_I suspected. If you evah need somewhere to stay, mon, do-wun't hesitate."_

"Much appreciated. I'll take that into consideration." Justin looked all around him again, this time with more emphasis to the oppressive, lackluster sky. "Solomon, have you ever thought about leaving this place? If you had a choice?"

"_I do-wun't tink so. Too much soul vested in d'garden, mon._"

"Okay, just checking." Justin said as he glanced at his wristwatch. "Look, uh, I'll contact you at seventeen-hundred hours and again four hours after that. Expect regular transmissions from meâ€|every four hours. If I miss one don't sweat it. If I miss twoâ€|I don't knowâ€|don't come looking for me. Just go to my igloo if you'd like and take whatever you need and carry on. Just make sure you're really vigilant, and don't be outside when the sun goes down."

"_Nev'ah am. And don't worry,_ _I'll make good use of d'igloo, Just'een, but dat Supaman comic stuff won't last d'next garage sale."_

Justin smiled. "Roger. Copy. Take care of yourself, eh?"

Reid turned off the radio.

After stowing the antenna, he took another look at those around him.

"Alright," Justin announced authoritatively, "give me a weapon and ammo count, and be honest. Now is not the time to let feelings get in the way of our mission. Also, feel free to let me know of other things you took from the stockyard that might be of use to us. Survival gear, med supplies, whatever. After you inventory your stuff, make ready to march into this Hellhole and get even more goodies."

Daylight was just beginning to wane as everyone had disclosed the amount (and worth) of their armaments to Justin. It wasn't what he'd hoped for. Granted, they had all dispensed their fair share of bullets on the overwhelming amount of aliens in that bay, as well as the super-zombie that none of them cared to dwell on, especially

Kaiser Sergei who had lost four of his best to it. All Sergei was left with was Jaggo—the old, half-blind and crippled man whose courage was about as robust as his physical abilities. This was all Sergei currently had to show of his empire. What was worse, Jaggo had expended all his ammunition undoubtedly on thin air. It took three others to lend him rounds so that the supplies were spread evenly.

Everyone else was busy in their task, each of them determined to make it out of this feat. They readied their arms and their personal supplies, ejecting spent clips, filling them again with fresh rounds, cycling and loading the firing chambers, securing improvised incendiary devices, downing leftover spirits, and attempting whatever else that could mentally prep them for whatever was to come. Currently, Jaggo was the only motionless body, his hands empty.

"You really are God-damned useless, aren't you, Jaggo?" Justin said. "The only reason you have any firepower on you is because others are stupid enough to give it to you. If you came up to me and asked me for ammo, I'd smack you down to that clay."

He didn't reply.

A few curious onlookers went back to what they were doing. Gibson apparently found spare time to attend to other matters. He approached Justin as the ex-Captain stuffed medicinal stock into a small duffel bag, inventorying and arranging supplies. Justin retrieved a pair of devices and flipped on a pair of switches, checking their functionality. "What do you have there, Reid?"

"Couple of radio transceivers, known as a Fox 'n Hound in the military."

"What are they for?"

"They talk to each other and let me know our elapsed distance. I'm gonna plant the Hound at the mouth of the cave. Every so often, it's gonna send out a pulse only detectable by the Fox that I'll be carrying. The Fox will report the delay in the transmission once the Hound receives its reply, letting me know exactly how much distance we've accomplished. You remember how far it is to the cache, right?"

"Yes."

"Exactly?"

"Not down to the milimeter, but well enough."

"Good. How difficult is it gonna be to navigate to the cache?"

"Not difficult at all." Gibson slid his hands into his trouser pockets smoothly. "The way is mostly straight. Just one tributary to take that veers slight-left. Take that down for a few more meters and it's heavy weapon city."

Justin continued his preparations.

"You haven't told anyone," Gibson whispered, "about the Pelican, have you?"

"Of course not, have _you_?"

"No."

"Okay," Justin said, resuming his packing, "good."

"But I just thought of a great ideaâ€¦"

"Uh-oh."

"Just listen to this." Gibson glanced a few directions and spoke lower. "Before we all go in there, announce that once we get the weapons we won't be going into the underground hangar. We'll be acquiring a warthog and go on patrol to secure the outer city limits."

"Why? That's not the plan."

"Of course it isn't. I just want you to say it becauseâ€¦"

"Gibson, no. The plan is to secure the _inside _of the city first, then we'll worry about the rest. We need a stable reach back point for when we go outside the wire."

"I agree. But I just want you to say this so we can see what kind of reactions you get. Faith is on short supply among the group. I don't think the mention of heavy weapons gave the kind of boost I thought it would. And lately you've been worried. I can see it all over you whenever you turn a dark corner or when your eye isn't on Sergei. You're always wondering who is still loyal to youâ€¦and who's going to turn on you. This gives us a gauge of that. And it won't rouse suspicion because it's the perfect time to say it now rather than surprise everyone with it later."

Justin stood motionless for a moment as he stared at Gibson.

"...Honestly, where the Hell did you come up with this? No, I'm serious, that is good thinking. Did you come up with that just now?"

Gibson exuded a kind of smug satisfaction while rocking back and forth in his loafer shoes. "Yeah."

"Where does that shit come from, man?"

"I'm the administrator of a city that every citizen would like to overthrow if they weren't afraid of starving to death. I'm paranoid on a daily basis." Gibson patted Justin on the shoulder and gazed harder at him. "But hey, I'm glad I could enlighten you to my take on things for once."

Justin chuckled. "You know something, Gibson? You're alright with me."

Justin extended his hand and Gibson shook it.

* * *

><p>"You see that over there?" the Kaiser bent over, whispering into Chris's ear. "That's a sign of caution. Already, the group is

dividing. Look at them over there." Sergei wrinkled his nose. "Two dictators shaking hands. Making rules that are absolute and unquestionable."<p>

"Don't start."

"You know when they formulate plans they're always single-minded and ill-informed, c'mon. When's the last time they consulted you in a big decision?"

"Why should they? I'm sixteen and I don't know much about combat and surviving zombie outbreaks."

"How about Ken or anyone else? I've never seen them offer any input, and I believe it's because they're scared to. People shouldn't be afraid of their leaders. And I don't like secrets. Secrets aren't healthy in a group dynamic."

Chris sighed. "Nobody likes secrets, but what can we do about it? We're not leading this posse."

"True, but that doesn't mean you don't have any sway in it."

"How so? They're our leaders because they are the most qualified out of any of us to make the decisions. That's probably how it should stay."

"I understand that, but we let them lead because we have that opinion of them, that they are qualified and fit to lead. They share our desires. Our goals are aligned, at least temporarily."

Chris paused the action of loading an assault rifle clip.
"â€|Elaborate."

Before America became part of the UEG, their Constitution was based on Social Contract Theory. Essentially, authority is derived from the consent of the governed. That's what kind of situation we supposedly have right now. Justin and the fat man aren't exactly pulling the wool over our eyes, but they are very much in control...maybe too much. Your leaders should be constrained by conscience just like we are. And no matter what they tell you, this is a democracy. You have a voice and an opinion, and you must never hesitate to use them if you feel your life or others' lives are in danger."

"Are they?"

"Besides running from zombies and heading into a closed mineshaft, not right this minute, not particularly."

"So what's the point of this conversation?"

"The point is, if you disagree with a decision your leaders make, you have the right to disagree and suggest alternatives. You've already done that when you mentioned the Pelican idea. And just because the working man wants to go out on a zombie hunt doesn't mean the majority of the group wants to either. I'm pretty sure the majority of us would rather leave this entire planet behind in ion rift-wake. Get my point now?"

"Yeah, I do."

Chris resumed his tasks, feeding rounds into the spring loaded clip, each seated into place with an audible _clack!_

"Hey, kid."

The voice made the hairs on Chris' neck stand up. He seldom heard that voice, but it was instantly recognizable as one of the men who tried to attack Chris in that dark, foggy courtyard a few nights ago. He spun around to see Jaggo standing there with a misshapen, almost disgraceful posture about him. As Chris stood up to full height and looked the guy in the eyes, he could see fear and something that looked like self-loathing. Whatever the man's past or his current state, Chris found it hard to offer respect. Justin's words and his actions could sting nearly anyone, Chris surmised. And for once, he was glad they did.

"What do _you_ want?" Chris gave Jaggo a wily, sidelong stare, stopping his inventories.

"Nothing of the sort when we first made introductions." He looked down to the ground again while extending his hand, saying, "Before we head into that tunnel, I just wanted to offer an apology. I know it's really nothing. It doesn't make up for what me and Paulie did, but...I don't know...I justâ€"

"â€"Go on." Chris said, shaking the hand once. "Finish your apology."

"Thank you." Jaggo nodded. "It wasn't right. I won't ask you to hear me out again. I'm sorry."

"Almost." Chris said. "Almost good enough. Now, apologize for all the people you and Paulie terrorized all these years. I know you have, and I know there were probably many of them."

"If I could find a way to somehow atone in an instant, I would, but it just doesn't seem like saying sorry to you can fix the things I've done."

Chris took a step closer, and Jaggo met the boy's eyes.

"You've done a lot of shit. You've toyed with a lot of people. Families, travelers, a lot of them probably innocents. What's worse is that you probably knew it while you did it. If you make it out of these caves, you're going to have to change. You know that, right? You can't just go on the way you have. I think you're right, Jaggo, you can't apologize everything away. You're going to have to spend the rest of your life undoing the things you've done."

Chris turned away.

* * *

><p>Almost immediately after his private discussion with the administrator, Justin had finished going over all his belongings one last time to make sure he was ready. He surmised that by now anyone with half a brain could've done the same. The day was just about up and sunset wouldn't be long from now. Already, he knew there was no

shot at salvaging the mission for this day; it would have to be put on hold for the night. Where they'd hole up during then was anyone's best guess. He already knew it wouldn't be easy on any of them.<p>

"Alright, everyone." Justin announced. "If you're not ready by now then you're too fucking slow. We're moving out as soon as I finish what I have to say. Now, weapons and ammo status isn't great, but we should be just fine enough to make it to the real hardwareâ€|but that's if we don't encounter too much trouble. Intel is scarce. There's no camera network in these mines so we really don't know what we're up against. Maybe there's nothing but rocks in there. Stay sharp anyways. We've got two pairs of NVGs taken from the stockyard, so silently thank whoever grabbed those. Does anyone have any questions or emotional outbursts they need to get out of the way before we move?"

There was no answer. The only sound was blistering wind chopping at everyone's coats.

"Okay." Justin said. "Oh, one more thing: better to tell you all now rather than later...Gibson's got a warthog somewhere inside the city. Once we get back from the mines, the group will split in two. First squad's gonna secure the inner city while second squad goes with me on a mobile frag fest with a fully-operational fifty-cal." Justin grinned devilishly. "If there's no objection to that, let's go get inside thisâ€"

"â€"I have an objection." Chris shouted over the wind.

Justin firmly set his jaw. "Spit it."

"Before, you said we'd be going airborne to get better visibility and possibly link up with more survivors. What happened to that?"

"What happened is another variable. We now have another method of transport. It has a working turret, so we're gonna make every use of it." Justin briskly slapped a full magazine into his assault rifle. "Anyone else got anything?"

"Now that we're on that subject," Sergei folded his stout arms, "who will be in each squad?"

"I haven't decided that yet."

"And you are the decider?"

Justin took two steps closer to Sergei. The movement signaled something. Justin was still a friendly, diplomatic distance away...but the look on his face was anything but forthcoming.

"Yeah, I am."

Sergei began to talk animatedly, using broad, fluid hand gestures. "You know, I could've said something like...you really do have no idea what you're doing and that you're just playing this whole thing by ear, but lately I chose not to so that this little group can have some kind of illusion of stability and progress. Now, Iâ€"

"Stability and progress." Justin interrupted. "Two things you railed against. That other men with you rallied against." Without looking, he pointed rearward towards City 17, jabbed his index finger in that direction. "That city..._all _cities here would've been far better without you mettling inward."

"THI are the real anarchists, Justin." Sergei smiled.

"Look around you, Sergei. You did this. You attacked. You ruined. You took us on this path."

"I bear some of the blame, yes, but who bears more? Who created the servitude you see today? Who always wanted that to begin with? Certainly not me."

Justin began to clench his jaw. "You more or less forced their hand."

"But I saw it coming and took action. We could've snuffed it out, but they upped the ante. So, not only did they send down a private army to wipe out millions, but they tortured their victims, raided our homes, desolated our industry and poisoned our water."

"No, the gangs of Gulag Hill poisoned the water. Some of them under your command, if I remember correctly."

"And where did that information come from?"

Justin remained silent.

"Be wary of THI and this administrator, Justin." Sergei pointed. "Ole money bags here will tell you that THI only means well. Of course they do, only as long as you're laboring about. It would only _appear _that the gangs tried to wipe each other out, but how do you explain _both _gangs having access to the _same _nerve agent they used on each other?"

Again, silence.

"THI equipped both sides. Nothing more than a divide and conquer tactic, Justin."

"Everyone knows their actions were a little heavy-handed," Justin fired back, "but can you blame them after what your people did? Sure, some corruption was uncovered and sure they had a tight grip on industry and exploited peoples' wages...but I do know that when people torch and burn their own god-damned community as a response, it's gotta be dealt with somehow. You acted like animals!"

"When people have nothing, they'll fight for anything. Have you ever had nothing?"

There was no response from anyone for a whole minute. Sergei resumed...

"So, instead of simply changing course over and over again because you actually _have _no plan, I think it's time we all come together and vote on our decisions from now on."

"I can't go for that." Justin replied.

"You've continually devalued others' opinions and took the reigns of leadership, dare I say out of pride? We now have little to show for it, and people have died."

"Listen here," Justin said sternly, "battle is a highly fluid situation. You plan for backup contingencies, and I have. You keep your original initiative, and I will. But what you don't do is share command. It's never a good idea."

Chris sensed a vibe amid them, a heated argument brewing under the cold air currents passing by. He realized he was standing right next to Sergei during this crescendo and covertly inched away with baby steps while the two men stared down one another.

Chris entertained following the Kaiser's advice, for it was indeed of higher logic than anything he'd heard for his time on Traxus Nine. The boy felt he had a legitimate concern and he wanted to address it among the group, especially with Justin. But as Sergei alluded to earlier, people would feel a natural apprehension to questioning decisions, and Chris himself was at this moment. He thought about the multitude of ways Justin might react should Chris vent his thoughts on such a paramount issue, of strategic objectives. Once he attained his pre-meditated distance from Sergei, he chose to the bolder action for once. He couldn't believe it was his own voice between his ears when he said, "Justin, everyone's been following your lead for good reason. To save life, not throw it away. Splitting the group up like that makes those who are left behind less capable of fighting them off, regardless of what kind of weapons we're carrying at that point. It's just my opinion, but maybe others here feel the same? I mean, whatever happened to sticking together to actually increase our odds of survival?"

Justin slung the assault rifle over his back and grabbed hold of his duffle bag by the strap, postured as if he was ready to begin the trek through the mines. "Let's make clear who is pulling the strings here. I am the most qualified to lead this rag-tag bunch of shit heels. I served in the UNSC for ten years. I planned and executed hundreds of combat missions against rebels and covenant on land, sea and air in more worlds than any of you will ever see in your lifetimes. If any one of you bastards can give me one reason why your opinion matters more than mine, I'm all ears. Until then, buck up and move the fuck along when and where I tell you to if you wanna keep breathing this thing called air."

"'He that keepeth his mouth, keepeth his life.'" the Kaiser said, shaking his head at the ground. "'He that opens his lips too wide shall bring on his own destruction.'" Proverbs, thirteen-three."

"I don't give a shit about what you have to say, Kaiser. Quoting those things won't make you win here, or any time_."

Chris swallowed a hard lump. "I have to agree with the Kaiser at this point. We think you're taking the road straight to Hell."

"Oh, and he said that to you?"

"â€|Yes."

"And what else has he said to you? What kind of poison have your ears

listened in on? Did he plant the slipspace Pelican seed in your head as well? Did he let you feel special by taking the credit for that one while he drove a splinter into the group? Did you actually believe in that? Chris, you just don't have a damned clue about what's going on here, do you? I mean, you'll just pick up that 'carby' and go fight for whatever son of a bitch convinced you you were right."

"Someone convinced _you _when _you_ joined the Marines."

"No. Not some_ one_, Chris. Some _thing _convinced me."

"Beg your pardon, Justin, but I've wanted to kill some Covenant ever since I could think for myself. If getting off this giant ball of shit means waiting around for parts, then I'm all up for that. The Hell with killing the zombies! Let them have this place! We're in the most important war of all time with the Covenant and I won't have someone telling me I'm not worthy of joining that fight, so fuck you."

"Wellâ€¦as much as you're just dying to get your ass shot off by some Covenant soldier, you might just gain some wisdom and learn to ignore guys like _these_."

"But his plan is sound! How can you not see it?!"

"Traxus Nine ain't all peaches and cream but it's better than dying face down in the mud with some split-lip bastard standing over you, pissing on your corpse."

"You would rather stay _here_?"

Justin sighed, "I was trying not to burst your bubble all this time. I was hoping I could let you down easy but I see that isn't possible anymore. Don't you see what is happening? Sergei's promised you this perfect, impossible escape plan. You and I would be _dead_ before we fly outta here. He'd wring your neck in your sleep the night before we'd take off."

"And that is why there's no chance of it happening." Chris said. "You're closed off from everyone. You're blind to change. You can't let go of the past, Justin. You've dead-ended and you're not taking me with you."

Bill stepped in between them. "Please, all of you. Enough of this bickering back and forth. We're attacking each other instead of the problem at hand."

"Only one problem at hand." Justin said, looking squarely at Sergei.

"Put it to the side until we're ready to make the city safe again." Bill urged.

"I have no problems with that."

"Nor do I." Sergei added evenly.

With that, everyone then shouldered their weapons and their items and prepared for the journey into the mines, once again on Justin's

lead.

**Underworldâ€|**

29. Guardians

```
/**SERIAL FEED TRANSCRIPT GENERATED**/  
>Full-Duplex Channel Allocation Active/  
>-BEGIN REPORT-<br>/**SIGNAL A** [FRQcarrier: 1.7THz] connected at  
-31.05dBm - **UNSC A.I., Avanes (MILID: 0055-VI-51455) **-  
Authenticity: 99.8%/  
>1:\Hibernation Interrupt Event: TStamp= Sol Clock Ref  
+10Y:6M:28D:27H:32M:21.5S\<br>[**Intrusion Detected!**]  
  
><strong><em>.<br>.._**  
><strong><em>...<em>**  
>/**SIGNAL B** [FRQcarrier: 1.71THz] connected at -29.5dBm - MD5vC  
Hash Thumbprint Value Confirmed: **UNSC CONTR, Dr. E. Kleiner (CIVID:  
0177-EK-51455) **- Authenticity: 99.72%/  
>2:\<strong>request: <strong>quick surveillance wakeup + full  
spectrum threat assessment\  
><strong>.<br>**3(**A**):\Acknowledged: Cyclic Surveillance &  
Biologic Categorization initiated\  
>3.1:\Carbon-based life forms detectedâ€|stby\<br>**.  
  
><em>..<br>_...****  
><strong>3.2:\Analysis: humanoid, bipedal, ct: 9\  
  
><strong>.<br>**4(**B**):\BREAK\  
>4.1:\Virus carrier positive?\<br>**.  
><strong>5(**A**):\Negative\  
  
><strong>.<br>**6(**B**):\Acknowledged\  
>6.1:\<strong>continue: <strong>assessment\  
  
><strong>.<br>**7(**A**):\Assessment: semi-hostile (kinetic  
armaments: gas-combustion projectile + CLASS II hand-held explosive  
ordnance [REF Code: W-43])\  
><strong>.<br>_.._  
><strong>8(**B**):\Acknowledged\  
>8.1:\<strong>consider <strong>threat minimal; **do not** engage\  
  
>8.2:\<strong>maintain<strong>: continuous + real-time surveillance\  
  
>8.3:\END\<br>**.  
><em>..<br>_**/SIGNAL A [FRQcarrier: 1.7THz] -96dBm/  
>SIGNAL B [FRQcarrier: 1.71THz] -102dBm/  
>Amplitude Rcv Error - Increase Input Gain Immediately To Maintain  
Connectivity/  
>Avalanche Current Threshold Imminent/  
>Channel Allocation Terminated/  
>-END TRANSCRIPT-<p>
```

30. From the Depths of the Darkness

**From the Depths of the Darkness, Enlightenment**

Light was a friend behind them, seeing them off as they set on their

journey into the world below.

Justin managed to keep his cool during the argument and didn't tell anyone that the Pelican was already capable of slipspace flight.

Just as Gibson foretold, the Warthog ruse gave a better understanding of everyone in their company. And while that certainly helped identify where people stood, no one's situation actually improved because of it. If anything, matters were now worse. And that fact couldn't have come at more inopportune time. With only guesses and worries on everyone's mind, a trek into the deepening dark would only play on those uncertainties. There was little truth to go off of now.

But Gibson had convinced Justin to take that path with the group. Gibson believed it was all for good reason. Hopefully, everyone remaining would last long enough to know what it was.

The remaining survivors stepped forth, and were once again swallowed by the darkness to come.

Joe Hendricksson was the last in as he high-stepped over a pile of rubble displaced from the crash-landed ship. One by one they disappeared in front of him, almost instantly sucked up by the void. He briefly glanced back, regarding the escape craft one last time. Even though the vessel was totally useless from the damage it sustained during re-entry, he couldn't help but marvel at it for just a moment longer. That ship saved his life. Whoever designed the on-board life support system was either a genius, or their invention was aided by divine intervention, by God Joe would spend more time with Bill, gaining better insight into the world of faith while his luck was up. If God was the explanation for his survival, better to compound on it by getting on His good graces.

He smiled before turning to follow the others into the mines—when something caught his peripherals. He froze for an instant, his heart immediately starting to thump in his chest. An internal dose of adrenaline coursed from his chest and into all his veins. All the memories of the world he left behind suddenly came back. He almost didn't believe that what he currently saw was real.

His long lost fears resurfaced.

But—no. It couldn't be.

Joe looked just below the prow of the crashed ship where the clay surface had been lifted up by burrow trails, unnoticeable to the untrained eye. Two distinct tunnels—no bigger than the size of his hand—were just barely under the ground stretching from the crash site to the open plains. Was it possible?

Joe wondered.

He left the nuclear waste of Sirius 6B long behind. And he journeyed through unimaginable distance and time, unaccompanied. It was little more than a memory after more than 400 years adrift in deep space.

A hand on his shoulder startled him. He turned back towards the cave and saw Ken standing there.

"What's wrong, Joe?"

Joe didn't answer Ken for the moment, and looked back towards the ship where the tracks lay. Even if it was what he suspected, at least the tracks looked as though they headed outside the mines rather than in. Whatever it was that created those lines, they were apparently more interested in the world outside. Furthermore, equally daunting threats loomed back in the city, far behind them now. Both issues were immaterial for the moment. His mind had to be on the present task. He'd have to worry about coming to grips with it all later. He was safeâ€|for the time being.

"Nothing's wrong," Joe eventually replied, "just pissed that she's in-op. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. Pelicans in these days have a good service record, but unless you've got a crew chief on hand and a warehouse full of parts, forget about ever fixing class-A failures in the field."

"So you can fly us outta here once we get that ship, right?"

"Sure. The Pelican was my primary rating. But I haven't flown in ten years, so don't expect much."

"I won't hold it against you. Just do your best; that's all anyone can ask of you."

Joe glanced back one last time before following Ken into the darkness.

* * *

><p>Already, the mine's walls were closing in around them. They swallowed what light there was with relative ease, the group on the verge of crossing into eternal dark. A total absence of light just a few meters in front, as if floating in darkness, Justin witnessed the loss of vision looming. It was as if the journey should be halted right then and there. Better to postpone for fourteen hours until the sun would be back in full force. But there was no going back. Time had already run out. This was the only way, now.<p>

Out of curiosity, Justin looked down at the ground right before he became one with the darkness, and discovered the Yellow Trumpet that grew there was no longer present. He surmised it was from the mine entrance collapsing a few days ago. _Better off, _he thought.

Justin slipped on a pair of NVGs, and the world around him changed from jet-black to ghostly, green fuzz. He once again had an edge over his surroundings. But even with assisted optics, Justin could only assess the way in front for about eight meters. The fact that his night vision goggles operated on the necessity of at least _some _ambient light to function dictated that he wouldn't be rewarded with much clarity being that there was barely a sliver of luminosity to begin with. It was already darkening outside to boot.

With the other set of NVGs in his possession, Chris donned them as well. He relished the fact he had an extra pair for himselfâ€|the third set he told no one about. He panned around: the walls were

jagged and stripped clean of minerals thus far in, no glitter to them at all. The floor was a fine layer of silt. Chris flipped his NVGs up and away from his eyes, staring down in the direction of his own handsâ€”currently grasping a UNSC standard issue pistol. Chris experimented, bringing his hands up to his face. They were invisible, as if he was only a pair of eyes this moment, which were utterly useless. He was a meandering spirit himself in this netherworld. Such lack of control was disheartening, but at least any possible zombies wouldn't see him either, or so he hoped; there was no telling the extent of their physical abilities. He stole a deep breath and repositioned his optics over his eyes again, watching intently over the surroundings as they all slowly stepped deeper, now at a downward grade, as if traveling straight to Hell.

In a sense, they were.

* * *

><p>Chris broke the silence, "Anyone know the story behind the word shit?"<p>

"What are you talking about?" Ken responded.

"The word shit. It has a history just like any other word."

"What's the story then?"

"Well, as ancient colonists settled North America, they had to sail there. The journey took months. Any plants they brought with them for food would have to be fertilized. So they used manure, animal droppings and stuff."

"Sounds disgusting." Joe said.

"So," Chris' shaky voice echoed all around, "they would always store the plants in the bowels of the shipâ€”no pun intendedâ€”and keep them there to avoid the salt mist until they arrived at their destination. Well, it only took a few times for the whole world to discover that anyone who wandered below decks in the night time with a candle would set the whole boat ablaze, methane gasses from the manure.

"The common practice from then on was to place the manure in the well-ventilated areas of the ship. When they crated the shit for transit, they stenciled the letters S.H.I.T. on the boxes, which stood for 'Ship High In Transport'. Shit."

"I would be laughing," Ken said, "but I'm too nervous. Bad timing, kid."

"It's okay." Chris said. "I was just trying to pass the time."

Justin didn't need to articulate his voice. The solid rock confines amplified it. He whispered, "Alright, people, a little more discipline is needed here. We need to stay quiet; we have no idea of what's ahead. And stay in close; I know most of you can't see, but I'll let you know if you get ahead of me."

It seemed to Chris that Justin almost uttered the words with an

aberrant compassion, so atypical to what he'd witnessed of Justin's mannerisms for all his time on Traxus IX. Maybe Chris wasn't the only one the mines were beginning to unnerve. He looked around: though he couldn't make out great detail, he could clearly see that everyone's features were tensed and wary, the lines of their faces contorted with a burgeoning fear. Everyone, including himself, already begged for a timely release from this environment.

But it would never come.

* * *

><p>"We're at five-hundred meters. How much further?" Justin whispered over his shoulder.<p>

No answer came from Gibson.

Justin stopped, turned around and looked for the admin. He was nestled closely in between Joe and Bill further aft, looking dubiously to the ground as he sauntered forth, his attention everywhere except where it needed to be. Justin turned a 180 again, briefly glancing behind him further into the mine shaft. It was clear for at least five meters. Backpedaling, he made his way to Gibson, eyes constantly glued to the void ahead like a trained sentry. He never once diverted his eyes from that direction. "What's up, Gibson?"

"Damned NVGs are giving me a hard time."

Justin could hear him fumbling with the hardware, angrily from the sound of it.

"Don't break it yet, they might still be functioning. Did you check the charge on them before we entered?"

"No, I forgot." Gibson articulated a weak laugh. "No going back though, eh?"

"We've got my set of eyes and they're fully charged. The path is narrow, so I'll definitely know when something's coming. And _if_ something comes, all we have to do is pour clips into that general direction. So no worries, let's keep pressing."

"And you're sure we've got ammo for repeated encounters like that?"

"Positive."

"Okay," Gibson sighed, "I'll just stay here in the back. Let's get this shit over with."

"Roger. Now, how much further?"

"I don't know. How long have we been walking?"

"Five minutes, five-hundred meters."

"Only five-hundred?"

"Keep your God-damned voice down." Justin whispered with an

impossible amount of cool.

Gibson began breathing rapidly. "Okay, it's gotta be less than two kilometers now, but I can't be sure."

"Jesus. Two kilometers? That's fucking ridiculous. We're definitely breaking this up into two days. We're going one more kilometer and then we're setting up camp."

"In here?"

"Ever heard of a thing called guard duty? We rotate two people out every two hours, and they'll take a pair of NVGs with them. You should've told me it was more than two clicks, man. Any more surprises while we're on the subject?"

"No."

Justin strode back up the point of the formation. "Then let's move."

* * *

><p>"Bill, I'm getting this feeling that things can't go on much longer like this."<p>

"Tell me why, Chris."

"I think the group is tearing apart."

Chris could make out Bill's face perfectly as they walked side by side, about ten paces behind the majority of the others. The ground was smooth rock now, no fine layer of sand to cushion their footfalls. But at least the ground was consistent and harbored no surprises, so Chris could place his attention away from his own footing and gauge other nuances—the behavior of those people he was with. Every time Chris watched him respond, Bill could never look him in the eyes—but that was not by choice, merely circumstance. Chris knew that Bill, just like everyone else without NVGs, couldn't see anything. But Chris could see Bill just fine. He waited for the holy man's answer as he studied his face in the dark, his disposition so impossibly fair and even despite the situation.

"You say the group is tearing apart. It was never really held together to begin with." Bill answered with surprising bluntness. "Justin formed this cut-throat alliance based on mutual goals, yes? As soon as either Justin or Sergei is no longer needed, they're no longer needed."

"They both went along with this alliance despite their own intentions," said Chris, "I know that. I think it's worse than that, now. Now, I think they've both changed. Especially Justin. I'm worried about him, Bill."

"You've never worried about him before. Why is it different for you this time?"

"He's not thinking straight. He's less concerned with survival and more concerned about his principles."

"I do not understand."

"Before, he was willing to team up with anyone on Traxus IX as long as they could fire a gun. But I think the Kaiser got the better of him back there. He doesn't just dislike the Sergei, Bill. He hates him. He hates every square inch of the man. He wants him dead, whether by his hand or someone else's."

"Hate is a strong emotion." Bill offered, not really sure what to say. "â€|But it's understandable for a man in Justin's position to be wary of Sergei. But maybe some day they'll both see the err of their ways."

"Bill, that some day will never come if we don't do something to settle things down right now. You may not see it yet, but I do. One of them is gonna kill the other, because they both know they can't share power. You need to keep an eye out on both of them. Do you hear me? Do you want to lose Justin?"

"Of course not."

"Then borrow some of the faith you've been putting in God and use it for yourself. Help me out."

* * *

><p>Layla had managed to keep her cool and stay alert. She didn't let her fears get the best of her despite blindly stepping into pure nothingness. A few times she felt the onset of vertigo with no visual reference. But she relied on something that could never be taken away, even on Traxus IX: gravity. The only force keeping her steady was the downward pull itself. She knew where 'down' was. Therefore, all the rest could be discerned in the mind. She suddenly felt a warm, gentle hand run over her forearm. She had no idea who it could be. She said nothing, made no unusual or sudden movements, just kept walking as normal.<p>

Another few secondsâ€|

"How are you holding up?" Justin whispered.

She sighed. "Oh jeez, I was hoping that was you. That guy, Jaggo, has been staring at me ever since we left the factory."

"If he ever makes you feel uncomfortable again, tell me. I'll put out his other eye."

Layla chuckled. "You're silly."

Justin withdrew his hand.

Despite the fact that Layla could see absolutely nothing, she looked around. "So, how much further do you think?"

"You know, honestly, I have no idea. All this shit looks just the same as it did five minutes ago and the electronics' margin of error has been increasing. I think we'll just stop in another few minutes though. I'm sure some people are getting tired. Sound good?"

"Yeah, that sounds good. My legs are aching already."

"Yeah, this downhill slope is doing none of us any good. And the ground is so hard."

"You know what I could really go for right now?" she said.

"What?"

"A scalp massage. If I were back home, my _real _home, that's where I'd be. A massage parlor."

"The little things. Withdrawal from the little things always hurts the most."

"Oh my God, yes."

"Well, when we get outta here, I'll be your masseuse."

"I'm gonna hold you to that. Hey, did I hear right up there? Sergei tried to convince Chris that a Pelican can go faster than light?"

"Yep, you heard right."

"That's not possible, right?"

"Right. Chris got all worked up, thinking we could order parts through Gibson and build that thing up to go into slipspace. Good plan, but it would take weeks to make it happen. And that's if we had no more problems with these aliens."

"Maybe some day it could happen. Maybe if we survive long enough."

"And maybe some day me and you can leave this place, together." Justin glanced around him, then looked back to her.

Her gaze was already rigidly trained on him, his figure, even though there was no way she could witness the seldom-seen excitement in his eyes.

"What are you saying?" she said.

Justin wish he could come out with it, that indeed the Pelican was already good to go, faster than light. That Gibson hadn't been quite the man they took him for all these years. But he didn't want to risk it here, not even a whisper."

"Nothing," Justin flatly, "just entertaining possibilities here."

"Yeah."

A tone that Justin hadn't heard in her voice since they slept together reached his ears. "Do you think we'll ever get off Traxus Nine?"

"Don't say this to anyone...but I think there's a good chance of it."

* * *

><p>The group had progressed even further.<p>

Despite zero visibility and the sounds of their own movements reverberating around them, and drafts of unknown origin swiping at their skin, none of them overtly complained. Not one word, not one fuss. Justin panned around with assisted optics: none of them actually looked afraid anymore. So careless was their collective posture that many of them walked with their heads down, a natural autopilot. They were relying solely on one person to call commands. Fools, Justin thought.

Time marched on with the survivors, and their minds became accustomed to their surroundings. Accustomed to so much change within so short a timespan.

It may've felt natural and easy, but it was precisely what Justin was trying so hard to avoid: complacency.

It was foolhardy to assume the best, especially in this place. Only one person had any Godly idea of what was going on in front of them: Justin.

He almost had it in him to butstroke the wall with his weapon to create some measure of pandemonium, something to stir them, to get them sharp-eyed and attentive again. But if there was any sort of enemy in the reaches ahead, that would merely invite trouble rather than create discipline within the group. At any rate, it mattered not how vigilant they were; Justin was the only set of eyes. Did their level of alertness have any meaning? They could not fight what they could not see.

Nevertheless, they had to be ready to fire blindly ahead if Justin so chose. Realizing that, Justin became slightly angered at their unwary conduct.

But unbeknownst to Justin, he wasn't the only one with night vision in possession.

Something was up ahead and Justin froze.

Though he couldn't see as far as the origin of the noise, he nevertheless leaned to the side. "Stop." he whispered emphatically.

He remained there with his sight on the group, making sure the order was obeyed. But it didn't appear that any of them were about to flout him. They complied, for they heard it too, impossible not to hear such a noise in such a finite amount of space.

"What in God's good name is that?" Chris whispered, scooting to just aft of Bill.

"It could be trouble. Let's remain quiet and await Justin's judgment."

Justin looked back to the front, nothing in sight. But it was there, just barely beyond the optic's range. Something was rustling in the

distance, possibly scraping at the walls. Whatever it was that could cause such a noise, it had to have been hard and strong enough to rub against rock the way it did.

Justin backpedaled a slight amount and became flush with the line of survivors holding steady from wall to wall, the human collective entirely occupying the width of the narrow confine. "If you're not locked and loaded," Justin said, "you're wrong."

"Did you see _anything?_" Ken asked while feeling for the exact location of his weapon's safety switch.

"Nothing." Justin answered.

Unbeknownst to all but Chris, Justin backpedaled even more. He was now two paces aft of the majority of the group. Chris found that odd. He watched Justin glance around uneasily.

Chris then looked back to the source of the ruckus up ahead. Nothing.

What was to come next baffled everyone.

"HEY!" Justin shouted.

The words echoed down the shaft, off the walls, in every imaginable direction. All the survivors instantly twitched in fear, wondering what drove Justin to possibly resign all their lives in an instant.

Then, to only Justin and Chris, the answer to that question appeared from the darkness.

* * *

><p>One of the horrid zombies came into the view of anyone who possessed working NVGs. It stormed up the incline and directly to them, no intention about it other than to kill anything living it could find.<p>

Chris waited for Justin's order to fire into the void ahead, waited for the right moment in which maximum damage could be inflicted without letting it veer to close to them.

The order didn't come.

"Justin?" Chris whispered. "When?"

Justin didn't acknowledge him, just stared ahead at the fast-approaching creature, which was Hell-bent on murdering someone.

"_Justin?_"

Still, no answer.

Chris looked at all those around him: they were tensed and ready, but they could not see—and their leader wasn't issuing any commands. Ahead now, the creature was nearly upon them. Chris remembered how adept they were at spanning great distance in a single bound, how

they preferred to leap and pounce on their prey from afar. It was now within that gap.

"JUSTIN?"

The man still was unreachable for some reason. Chris raised his weapon and prepared to douse the creature with all his ammo, but before he could, Justin sidestepped behind Jaggo and kicked the crippled man in the back, thrusting him forward into the encroaching zombie.

Chris witnessed it all with perfect clarity.

First, the zombie ran right into Jaggo and together they chest-butted one another. Before the human even registered the impact, the zombie had whipped one of its tentacles at his neck. The carotid artery was punctured, and a fountain of colorless, liquid gore spurted all over Chris' lenses. The look on Jaggo's face was one of acceptance, of instant defeat. He dropped to his knees with his eyes closed, perhaps praying it would just be quick and painless.

It was quick.

But it was not painless.

The zombie used its host's mouth to chomp down on the crown of Jaggo's skull. Hair and a large fragment of cranium were removed, then the blood really started to gush out. Chris pointed his weapon at Justin, then back to the creature, back to Justin, unsure of what was happening. But the zombie was exactly sure. It was killing Jaggo, and would feed on each human one by one until they were all dead.

The fallen Jaggo caught Chris' attention again. Right as the boy placed his eyes back to that horrid sight of fright and predation, he realized there were no more sounds; the zombie merely stood over its victim, Jaggo motionless, lifeless. Jaggo was dead quicker than Chris realized.

Not even any thought required, Chris stepped forth towards the zombie with two brisk strides and took aim, once again prepared to stop it dead. But before he could act, for the second time, Justin took care of it for him. A deafening roar and a fleeting flash simultaneously filled the area, followed by the garrulous crash of an undead body to the ground not a few seconds later. Justin had put a hole clean in its chest. Only silence lingered.

Chris merely stood and stared at a man who was alive not even a minute ago, trying to take stock of what just transpired while everyone around him pointed their weapons into random vectors. They were oblivious.

Chris was full of shock. He knew it, but he still had to process it. Was he going mad? Was he seeing things? Of course not. What he saw really did happen. But Chris kept silent, unable to produce any words. What he witnessed baffled him beyond all known belief. A man was just killed in cold blood, something Chris never thought he would witness in his whole lifetime. And yet, here he was, witness to it all. The whole, bloody act. And Justin was the perpetrator.

* * *

><p>Chris watched through blazing, tearful eyes as Justin scooped up Jaggo's belongingsâ€”his weapon, his ammo and his personal affects.<p>

"Are we safe?" Bill asked, unsure of where to place his sights.

"Yes. But Jaggo is dead." Justin's reply echoed. "A zombie just came out of nowhere. Too fast. Way too fucking fast."

"You killed it, right?"

"Not sure. We'd better check."

"You check." Ken said.

Justin did so without a word or hint of irritation despite his reluctance to ever take an orders from another.

"Holy shit." Justin said as he knelt down. "Guys, get over here!"

Everyone came running up and crowded around the fallen creature.

"Anyone recognize this?" he said, shining a flashlight on the would-be face of the host.

"Oh my God," Layla said, "That's Jim Carsa."

"Let me see!" the Kaiser shouted, butting his way forth. He knelt down as Justin had earlier, his face speaking curiosity. "They got him." he declared.

"Not much left of your personal staff now, is there, Kaiser?" Justin said. His words fell on deaf ears as Sergei examined the body. Sergei wasn't fazed by the insult, nor was he particularly fazed by Jim's apparent fate.

_Yeah, you heartless bastard. _Justin thought.

"I wondered where he went to." Chris said. "Hadn't seen him since we found that flower."

"What flower?" Layla asked.

"â€|Nothing." Chris said. "It's nothing. Justin?"

"Right." Justin said. "Let's keep moving."

"Lord be with you in the final hour." Bill whispered into the air.

Justin briefly glanced upwards at Bill, shaking his head in confusion. "I suggest me get moving." Justin urged. "Every zombie within two clicks could've heard that, maybe even farther in here. Let's keep walking just a little more. We'll shack up for the night."

* * *

><p>Justin scanned the periphery as the remaining survivors set up camp for the night under his watch. It was always night this far in.<p>

"Damn," Joe said, "I almost prefer walking again. It's dead cold in here."

"Then everyone huddle in close to conserve body warmth." Justin said over his shoulder, eyes ever to the depths of the mine. There was no answer and no one moving. "Alright, then, suit yourselves."

Eventually, Chris had realized what happened. He spent the last 15 minutes replaying that horrid scene over and over in his mind. Justin sent Jaggo to his death. He had betrayed another.

Had Justin truly gone mad? Had the flower he induced finally claimed him?

But over those 15 minutes, Chris also had the chance to calm down. At first, he kept his mind occupied with the simple task of opening the tough hide of an MRE, its thick plastic showing an incredible affinity for staying sealed. Chris eventually had to break out the buck knife he stole from the stockyard. He stabbed at it once, then enlarged the hole with two fingers before it finally gave way. The foodstuff was packed full of items: the main course was tortellini in a cardboard packaging accompanied by a Magnesium/Sodium-filled heating element. All he had to do was add a few drops of water from his canteen, also stolen. While he waited for the pasta to warm, he appetized his hunger with crunchy crackers and a peanut butter spread, suprisingly tasty despite the food being very close to the end of its 5-year shelf-life. He rummaged through the rest and found a spiced poundcake for desert, a teabag, a packet of electrolyte-rich drink sweetener and a ziploc full of M&M chocolates. His heart rate had finally reached equilibrium after all this, no longer racing. His adrenaline had settled, and now he had food in his stomach. He could finally think clearly.

Chris reflected back to when he first arrived here, how Justin greeted him and how he treated him thus far.

Justin wasn't a good friend, not by a long shot. Then again, Chris never had a true friend. He had no contacts, no one he could ever call on after long years apart, no one to rely on, never a family for support. Chris was very much alone in the universe.

But the funny thing he just realized was that Justin had been the best friend he ever knew ever since entering the world of Traxus IX, the best friend in his entire life if measuring up the merit of his deeds alone. Justin was rough around the edges, but he saved Chris' life twice. Once, at the courtyard his second night here; the other time, when Paulie and his men showed up at their igloo.

Maybe it was his own fault in a way. From everything Chris knew about human nature, the likes of Justin and the likes of Kaiser Sergei were on opposite sides of the spectrum, seemingly always at odds with one another in terms of ethics and morality. Reid and Sergei, sworn

enemies since day one hereâ€"each with their own set of guiding principles. Did that mean Jaggo's killing was justifiable? Should it always be war here?

Chris had vowed to be the diffuser of the situation, but he failed to act quickly enough.

* * *

><p>Some time later, Chris had finished the rest of his night's rations. He had disposed of the waste by stuffing the wrappers and containers back into a pouch in his backpack. He could feel the weight of the high-calorie meal setting in. Along with that, his eyes grew heavy. The steady state of physical and mental distress over the past few hours was ever present like a direct current voltage. He held a slight amount of concern about falling asleep in such a place, but he wasn't alone. And he heard Justin mention something of guard duty earlier. Thankful for the fact that he wasn't picked for it, Chris let the lethargy sink in. So much had happened. He needed rest. He needed the OFF switch.<p>

But rest wouldn't come, not yet. He heard the pattering of footsteps work their way closer to him. He donned his NVGs and looked up.

"Hey, kid. How are you holding up?"

"Fine, Justin."

"You didn't tell me you had a pair of NVGs."

"You never asked me."

"You took them for yourself?"

"Yeah, I took 'em from the stockyard when I gathered up the other two pairs for you guys. They're pretty cool, huh?"

"They sure are. Why don't you put them to good use and do guard duty with Ken."

Chris sighed. "For how long?"

"Two hours. Got a watch?"

"No."

"Then here," Justin said, tossing his timepiece on Chris' lap, "have mine. Get to it."

* * *

><p>"How'd you get here anyways?"<p>

"I was a stowaway on a cargo freighter. I came here to find work before I would join the Marines. I always heard people talking about how anyone could find work with the THI. Figured I couldn't go wrong at their busiest location. Turns out they didn't know much."

"â€|You could say that. But you've been doing pretty well here,

kid."

"Thanks. I'm trying not to lose it like everyone else."

"Yeah, it's got a shit load of problems. Gangs, psycho drug dealers, warlords, and maybe more—and now zombies."

"So it's more like ten shit loads then."

Ken chuckled. "—You could say that. Say, what time is it now?"

Chris panned his NVGs down to his wrist. "It's about time to go. Let's head back."

* * *

><p>After a short trek back, Chris and Ken could see a faint glow up ahead. The group had lit a fire. Chris and Ken exchanged short, wary glances at one another.<p>

"Who's idea was this?" Ken mumbled.

Within voice range, Justin saw them approaching by the flickers of light against their shadowy figures.

"See anything?" Justin called out.

"Everything seems to be okay out there." Chris said, slightly winded from the walk.

"Alright," Justin announced, "whoever's next, get out there."

Joe and Layla stood together. On his way out, Joe approached Chris. "Can I have those?"

"Sure." Chris said, handing the NVGs over in mid-stride.

As the pairs of guards passed one another by, Chris stopped short of the group sitting flame-side. He looked squarely at Justin. "What, this is safe? Making a fire like this?"

"We'll see better with a fire, and it's fucking cold."

"Oh."

"Fire keeps the rats away." Justin added.

Chris cracked open a bottle of water, poured the contents into his canteen, chucked the empty bottle and started drinking. "Rats, huh?"

"Yep."

Chris chuckled. "I had this friend once. He used to eat 'em, rats." Chris removed his flannel-lined overcoat and took a seat by the fire. "And Justin, you'll appreciate this. You don't just heat up the oil. No-no-no, that makes them stick to the pan. What you do is you get your pan really hot, then you put in your oil cold, and that's when you add your rats." Chris' hand movements became more articulate

as he spoke, "But be careful not to crowd the pan or else it sucks the heat right outta the oil. And you gotta keep flipping them or they'll burn and you don't wanna go there. And I swearâ€|my friend said that if you cook 'em up just right they taste likeâ€|"

"â€|Chris, you must be confusing me with someone who gives a shit."

Chris fell silent and looked dubiously to the ground, nearly chastized by Justin's callousness.

"How's the battery life on your NVGs?" Justin asserted.

"Before I handed them to Joe they were at sixty percent."

Justin didn't answer.

* * *

><p>Looking through the green haze of the NVGs for however long Joe Hendricksson had stood watch for, he was starting to feel the boredom set in. A few times, he caught himself losing focus on the darkness ahead, which wasn't good. For one, everyone was counting on him. If he blew it, they'd all be devoured or maimed, and that was after he was a goner. Also, they had already encountered one ravenous zombie; it wasn't improbable that there were more lurking the deep recesses of the world.

"So," Layla asked, breaking the silence that gripped them, "I never got to ask you where you were from. I've never seen you around."

"Earth."

"What's it like there?"

"I can't really answer that."

"Why not?"

"I shouldn't even be alive to talk about it. That ship back thereâ€|"

"Yeah?"

"That was mine. It's an escape vessel. I came from Sirius Six-B. I left that place in the year twenty seventy-eight."

"My God! You'reâ€|you're over four-hundred years old!"

"Now you know." Joe smiled. "Butâ€|I'd imagine Earth is the same as any other place. Just millions of people living their lives the best way they can."

"I'd like to see that place someday." She smiled, "Justin and I are going."

"Best of luck to you. I really hope you two get there."

Something instantly alerted the two of them. "What's that?" Joe whispered.

"Another one?" she asked. "Tell me the instant you see it. I'm gonna unload a whole clip on its ass."

"I don't see _anything_."

"But you hear that, right?"

A moment later, it got louder: a hoarse undulation of breath, in and out, in and out. It was the most ragged, leather-lunged cough of a breath either of them had ever heard. Nothing human could be making such a sickly, wet sound.

"Hard not to." Joe said, raising his weapon into sight.

"Waitâ€|" Layla said, pouring all her focus into hearing. "It's getting closer." she whispered lower. "Tell me when."

Then, a stranger noise permeated the void.

"What's that?" she whispered.

"It sounds metallic." Joe answered.

A strange jingle of unknown metal on rock resounded through the sloped mine shaft. For the moment, it was a steady rustle, a metallic ping echoing about every two seconds.

Instantly, the frequency multiplied. The echoing increased and got louder. The proximity was indiscernible as it amplified off the walls, but it definitely ventured closer. Now, the tempo of the rustling was as a heartbeat, thumping in their ears and clanging against the rock the louder it got, until both Layla and Joe lost their nerve. As if to kick them while they were down, their fears were confirmed.

The maker of all the noise produced a blood-curdling shriek. It nearly deafened them both, the noise somewhat too close.

"I think we should get back to the group now." Joe shouted.

The two of them turned and bolted.

* * *

><p>Chris watched the flames dance and play shadows against the walls. The synthetic resin fuel beneath the sizzling display crackled and spat charred cinders in all directions, which cooled once they bounced off the ground not a few inches away. Once again, Chris felt sleep calling him as warmth and modest comfort returned. He'd only get two hours which was far from ideal, especially factoring in all the stress he had been through since his last sleep. But he had to capitalize on this opportunity. Before he rested his head down on his backpack, he caught the side of Ken Sopher's face staring off into the distance, deep in thought. And right as Chris closed his eyes, a familiar and unwanted voice crept in.<p>

"You saw what happened." the Kaiser said.

Chris rolled over and saw that Sergei had scooted his way closer to him. "Saw what?"

"When Jaggo died, how did he go out?"

"He went down swinging, Kaiser."

"You're hiding something. Don't sugarcoat."

"I don't know what it is you want to hear, honestly."

"You don't have to tell me anything. I can see it in your eyes. This fire tells me everything I need to know. So, now I'll ask you, who is the real villain among us?"

* * *

><p>Joe and Layla ran for their lives.<p>

The noise wasn't getting softer, which meant it was pacing right with them, running them down. And they weren't about to compare their endurance with its. They had already seen what these creatures were capable of.

But to Joe and Layla, that was okay. They'd rather deal with this monster as a group than by themselves. The rest of the survivors were not far ahead.

"Not much further now!" Joe shouted over his dwindling breath.

Layla almost entertained the impulse to look over her shoulder, but that would take away a stride or two, which were precious right now.

"There's the fire!" she shouted.

Ahead was salvation.

Joe could almost hear the crackling and see shadowy shapes milling about the orange glow, so hazy from this distance.

"HEY!" Joe shouted.

The figures ahead stopped moving, their outlines fixed into position.

"They heard us." Joe said, pumping his legs despite the lactic acid building in them.

Layla was right beside him, running the hardest she ever had in her life.

The glow got closer and closer, brighter and brighter.

"There's one right behind us!" Joe shouted.

As they got to within a stone's throw away from Justin and the others, their legs about gave in and they faltered towards the ground, rolling to a grinding halt at the remaining survivors'

feet.

Justin switched on his optics and peered ahead. The sound nearly gave the creature away before he could even make out its silhouette in the shadowy distance. "Everyone, FIRE!" he ordered.

The pitch black ambience became a myriad of white and orange-yellows as all manner of muzzles flashed in the direction of the incoming threat. At first, Justin saw that none of the rounds fazed it. But the closer it drew, the slower it advanced. Finally, after more than five seconds of steady firing, the monster dropped in its tracks, letting out one final gurgle as its testament to unremitting malevolence.

The mine shaft was dark again. Silence settled as the ringing lingered in everyone's ears from the tremendous volley they served unto the death of the murderous zombie.

"Stay here." Justin ordered everyone.

He stepped forth. The carcass of the fallen humanoid already gave off pungent odors. It was a burden to simply confirm its death.

Justin stepped over and around it, attained a good look at its head. A venture to identify the host...before they turned. Maybe a drug lord. Maybe a factory worker. Maybe a familiar face, once.

It was of little consequence. The face was so badly mangled that not even a forensic scientist could gather the truth. There weren't even any teeth left in the victim, just viny scilia protruding from the mandibles lying limply.

"Did you know that person?" Chris asked.

"No. There's no face this time. I guess the parasite that claimed this one decided to do some Feng Shui."

"That's terrible, Justin." Layla said.

"Wait," Justin said, "What's this? There's a chain tied around its neck."

"What?" Layla shouted. "Let me see!" She stepped closer to the corpse, "That explains the metal sound we heard." she said, turning to Joe.

"That's right." Hendricksson said. "Just what the Hell is going on here?"

Justin picked up the chain. "Let's follow this and find out."

* * *

><p>The group had another new task.<p>

On top of reaching the high-yield cache of weaponry, they had to find just what exactly was going on in the mines. A zombie, chained up like a caged animal. Only one thing was now certain: things would either get stranger or clearer. Only time would be their next obstacle to truth.

But designs of a different nature were playing on the survivor collective as well. Presently, Chris occupied the lower third of the group, panning around with his night vision, periodically glancing back at the stragglers to ensure the formation was intact. No one needed the ears of a fox to sense the overweight admin approaching at Chris' heels.

"Hey, kid. How are you holding up down here?"

"Fine." Everyone here was anything but fine, Chris especially. The lone witness to murder from the man he once trusted most—he was sure he had seen it all at the young age of sixteen, no less. "Any more questions?"

"Let me talk to you for a minute. Alone."

Chris slowed his step until everyone else was an amicable distance in front of him and Gibson. "Speak."

"Justin, myself and Ken have got a plan going to get rid of the Kaiser. You need to be on-board so you're not blind-sided by this when it happens."

"What's the plan?"

"We're not really sure yet. It kind of has to be played by ear. My best advice to you is to be on alert when we get close to the Pelican. That's when it'll happen. Steer clear of the action, and keep your gun at the ready. Hopefully, you won't be needed. Justin's confident he can end it quickly. Sergei is all alone now, so it should be easy. Then again, there's no doubt he's desperate. He knows he's all alone. I just wanted to let you know the recent developments."

"I can't believe it's actually going to happen."

"C'mon, kid, it has to happen. Look at him. Look at what he's done, what he's committed his life to. Do you really think he can change overnight? Chris, that kind of man...he isn't a man."

"No, I believe anyone can change. We're not executioners, Mister Gibson."

"Look, I don't like this sort of thing any more than the next guy, but the truth is it must be done. Listen to the part of you that fears his very presence. That's your good, incorruptible part. That man is evil."

"That's not true. He hasn't turned on us yet and he easily could have."

Gibson sighed, "Who knows what's true or not? Sergei, whether he'll turn on us or not, is dirty. He knows this about himself. And he knows that we know. Even if you forgive him, it doesn't mean that he'll forgive himself. The point is: the whole fucking situation is dirty. And dirty times call for dirty deeds, yes?"

Chris nodded bitterly, sensing the tears swelling up again. "Casualties of war."

"That's right, Chris, casualties of war. Distance yourself from emotion. You'll live longer."

Chris caught no particular expression from the admin before he quickened his pace, catching up to the rest of the group.

* * *

><p>"How long have we been following this chain?" Gibson grunted.<p>

"I don't know." Justin said, half-occupied. "A while I suppose."

On Justin's lead, the survivor collective traversed ever deeper, the pace somewhat swifter this time around.

"What happened to stopping one kilometer in, and resting?"

"If you're tired, cry about it. We're not stopping now."

From the rear of the crowd, Chris thought he heard Mr. Gibson whimper in between his panting breaths.

Ken quickened his pace and strode up beside Justin. "What do you think is going on here?"

"Well, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that it's something strange. First of all, how in the Hell would anyone be able to wrap a chain around one of these bastard's necks? I don't see that happening. You'd need a dozen strong men to do that. Even then, at least one of them would get shit-canned in the process. We have to investigate."

"Why, Justin? Why not just forget about it and do what we've set out to do? It's safer to get the weapons we need, and we do need them. We don't know how many more of those super-zombies are out there...in here.""

"I know what you're thinking, Ken. I know what everyone else is thinking too: why meddle in affairs that aren't ours? Why risk more danger? Truthfully, for me, I need to know. This is bigger than us. This is bigger than our escape, too."

"I'm sure you know by now that everyone else has been running scared these last few days. I'm not sure we have the nerve to do this anymore, Justin. We need a break. We need the Pelican. There, is that what you wanted? To know that you were right all along?"

Justin chuckled darkly. "I don't care about being right anymore. Not since I found this!" Justin rattled the chain recklessly against the bedrock, a fierce echo painting an audible bull's-eye over their location. "I just care about the truth...and we're gonna get straight to the heart of it."

* * *

><p>As Justin advanced further inward with the group in tow, the chain he held slackly in his hand fell to the ground aft of his step, link by link clanging impetuously to the ground. The group

reluctantly followed.<p>

Right as Gibson let out another one of his irritated, explosive sighs, Justin halted.

"Stop." he ordered.

Silence followed.

No one said a word. No one moved.

Chris saw the situation perfectly from the rear of the group. Up ahead, bathed in a ghostly green fuzz, was Justinâ€|holding the end of the line.

Chris inched forth. On the way up, he offered a soothing pat on the back to all near him before reaching Justin's side. Taking his place, he assessed the way ahead before placing his gaze to a massive palisade driven into the earth before him. Jutting up into the air about waist high, it looked to be solid metal, the sturdy chain attached to it.

"This is new." Chris offered.

"This is bad." Justin corrected.

"I guess ordinarily this would be a good thing." Chris said, meeting Justin's gaze. "But I guess not now?"

"Look at it. It would take some kind of heavy machinery to puncture solid bedrock like this. And the fabrication is way too clean. This was no accident. Someone put this here."

"But what for?"

"Now that is _the _question."

Together, as if sharing one mind, Justin and Chris stepped forth again, past the anchor.

"Everybody, come on." Justin ordered. "Slowly."

"_That will be far enough._" a voice echoed out.

Everyone froze. The string of words unleashed upon the encompassing void seemed to blast right by all the survivors and roil beyond them, clamouring all the way up the mine shaft.

Justin and Chris looked around. There was nothing ahead. They glanced back beyond the others. There was nothing behind.

"Umm...where did that come from?" Chris whispered tensely.

Justin stiffened and answered through gritted teeth, "I don't know."

* * *

><p>Five minutes.<p>

It had been five, whole minutes since that command was shouted into the darkness. Justin gradually became more animate as time elapsed, looking all around for the presence.

"Who are you and what is going on?" Justin demanded.

No answer came. The only substance present in the mine shaft with them was a cold, brisk draft of air.

"C'mon." Justin ordered the group. He began walking, then stopped a few seconds later. The only footfalls registering about the air were his own. He turned around.

No one else had followed.

"Ignore that voice." Justin instructed. "Of course it doesn't want us here. Ever see The Wizard of Oz?"

Justin spun on a heel and resumed his progress.

One more step and he was halted mid-stride by a blinding light. It shone in his face and saturated his optic's display, eventually overcoming the limits of his own visual acuity in the form of sharp pain. Pure, white light invaded his squinted lids. He instantly covered his face with one arm and removed his NVGs with the other. From wall to wall, an aura so pure and intense stunned them all.

Moments later, it subsided a slight amount, barely allowing them to see.

They all squinted with creased brows, wondering what it could be that was capable of producing such luminosity. And just then, the light was instantly doused. The world grew dark again with purple spots swarming the ambience like otherworldly fireflies.

"_I assume you came this far to find the answers to all your questions_."

Justin deftly reached up for the NVG's activation switch, fumbling for it in the dark. He refastened the strap around his head and tapped the control switch, but the display didn't respond. The comforting, pale-green panorama never returned. All he got was pitch-black. The optics were dead.

"_Precision EMP. __You will see what I want you to see, nothing more. You will go where I tell you to, nowhere else. If you take issue, you can go back the way you came. If you are compliant with these terms, then follow me._"

* * *

><p>Heavy footfalls in front signaled to the group that there was someone , or something large and heavy in front leading them. It went on in silence for a while, with nothing spoken and nothing accomplished. Only walking further into the mysterious unknown, an equally anonymous leader taking them to whatever fate lied ahead.<p>

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Justin asked aloud after

some moments.

There was no response, just the steady pounding of what was presumably footsteps into the hard ground.

"Are you the one who speaks to me?"

Still, no answer.

The steady thuds stopped. It halted.

Then, lights recessed into the ceiling turned on. A natural white glow filled the area.

The one that guided them was revealed.

* * *

><p>"My name is Doctor Kleiner."

A humanoid silhouette fluidly turned to face them upon visibility being restored. A suit of bulky power armor resided before them, the clear faceplate of it showing a middle-aged man with thick glasses and a balding scalp. His face was the only organic feature visible under the gargantuan chassis.

"_You've wandered into a classified research facility. Normally, I'd have my sentries turn you awayâ€"_"

"â€"Normally?" Justin raised his chin at the visor towering over him.

"_These aren't normal circumstances, are they_?" the Doctor's voice emitter resounded flatly.

"Nothing about any of this is normal to us."

"_Rightly so, but you and your followers have shown to be quite enduring. I've had my eye on you ever since you decided to go back into the city. Your very presence here warrants my respect_."

"Well, thanks and all, Doctor, but I'd like to know just what in the Sam Hell is happening. Are you and your buddies playing God down here?"

"_You could say that, Mister Reid_."

31. The Man Behind the Curtain

**The Man Behind the Curtain**

"Fuck, the robot knows my name." Justin mumbled.

"Let us talk on the move." the Doctor said with urgency. "There are still a great number of tasks to accomplish. If I'm to be of any help to you, ensure that you're able to pay attention from here on out. There is a lot of information to take in and a good deal of ground to cover. You must follow me and go nowhere else. If you deviate in any way I will know about it. The first noncompliance action will result

in you returning to the surface. Consider that your only warning. And consider your presence here a privilege, not a right. If you are ready, then come."

The Doctorâ€"covered from head to toe in an impervious suit of some exotic alloyâ€"stepped away and deeper into the mine shaft.

Justin paused briefly, let the Doctor attain an amicable lead ahead of him and the rest of the survivors so he could quickly assess his surroundings.

"Do you trust this guy?" Ken asked, striding forward.

Justin briefly pivoted 180Â°, lending genuine thought to Ken's question as he scrutinized the way they had just journeyed fromâ€" It was utterly bereft of light, and thus hope, nothing but death and chaos at the surface. There was no way Justin was leading the group back that way, not after this. They had a mission to eradicate that distant threat, to the end of acquiring the one last resort to survivalâ€"and an escape.

Gibson's Pelican.

But what was a sound plan at survival suddenly turned into a quest for truth: the Doctor's very existence here and what it would ultimately mean.

All of them would discover it soon enough. Of that, Justin was certain.

However, he wasn't entirely certain that they would fare any better once they knew.

Justin turned to look Ken in the eyes. "No."

* * *

><p>It was hard for anyone to accurately gauge how much time went by since the initial encounter with the armored scientist. A lot of walking had been accomplished since then. Much of the group was captivated by their new surroundings, trying to assess them now that they presumably had total safety. Such strange ones they were, a stark contrast from everything they'd witnessed of the mines so far. The corridor they were being led through was wide enough for ten people to walk shoulder to shoulder. About five meters off the deck, the ceiling was certainly more accommodating than the shaft they transitioned from. Such a spacious, accommodating layout meant this place was built for transporting something large.<p>

It was all business here with absolutely no amount of panache, the polar opposite of a factory-city administrator's dwelling. Surely, Gibson would soon tire of this place as he had all others. Justin rarely recalled the Admin leaving his palace in the courtyard. Gibson wasn't exactly in the best of shape, either.

Presently, Justin and the Doctor jointly formed the point of the human formation. Side by side, they traversed while the others formed a loose gaggle not too far off their heels. Bulky lower appendages thudded into the ground one after the other as the Doctor inexorably strode on. The overhead lights he activated earlier accentuated his

suit as the visible rays bounced off, casting strange reflections about the dark, dreary walls. Justin looked hard at the material as he walked, stealing glances. Sturdy, yet malleable it was; it obviously flexed in accordance with the occupant's movements. Justin wanted to examine it closerâ€”as if he were a scientist himselfâ€”to figure what exactly it was composed of.

High-Carbon Steel? Titanium? There was no way to be sure. There was no burgundy tint typical of Titanium, or the grey sheen of Steel. It looked more coppery than anything else: a muted, orange-brown luster. Yet surely it was not. Copper was perhaps too fragile for supporting such bulk and a man inside it. Copper was too malleable and would bend under enough stress. It was then that Justin wondered exactly what kind of stresses this strange metal was designed to withstand. Why the need for armor?

There was only one explanation in Justin's mind.

The downward slope had leveled out gradually since passing the monster's anchor in the ground. The surfaces of the walls had changed. Whether that change came abruptly or not, no one could remember. All anyone knew is that instead of the usual rock, the makeup of the surrounding bulwark was anything but organicâ€”some sort of burnished metal. The Martensite grain structure of it ran along in gentle, sinusoidal waves as if microscopic fingers channeled the molecules to some end, resultant of a flawless heat-treating and annealing process produced exclusively by a select few foundries scattered throughout the galaxy.

Every so often, a conduit embedded within the walls glowed with light-emitting diodes arranged in logical order, perhaps status indicators of something housed beyond them.

"You're probably wondering what those panels do." the Doctor stated on cue. "They are biometric scanners. They respond only to my signature. Don't get any crafty ideas please."

"You have secrets down here you want to keep hidden." Justin said, his gaze straight-faced, pointed dead ahead.

"An understatement," the Doctor replied, "in both my personal and professional opinion."

"These doors," Justin pointed about, "where do they lead?"

"To the worst imaginable places. We will not be venturing through there and you need not concern yourself with them."

Justin sneered.

The steady thuds kept pounding into the bedrock, the Doctor showing no intention of slowing or stopping in his immense, powered bulk.

Chris huffed and looked around at the many doorways stemming off from the corridor, more like fortifications if anything. They were nearly as tall as the ceiling and very wide, and very sturdy by the look of it. Instinct boiled in his veins to walk up to one, tap a knuckle and gauge an assessment at density. If what the Doctor said was trueâ€”that the worst things imaginable lied behind those

rampartsâ€”he wanted to be sure they were safe. But that was simply impossible. Doctor Kleiner had made it quite clearâ€”twiceâ€”that they were to do nothing other than follow him. Chris had no intentions to be the one who ruined it all. They were on someone else's turf and their terms, which Chris noticed was starting to become a routine occurrence.

"How long does it go on like this?" Gibson shouted from the rear of the group, his face puffy and reddened.

The Doctor didn't answer, didn't even look back.

"Don't worry about him." Chris said. "He's a complainer. We're all fine. We're still here."

Again, no form of acknowledgement from the Doctor whatsoever.

Chris looked overhead to the ceiling. The lighting was a ghostly-white glow, much like the courtyard illumination of City 17. It lit up the ambience nicely, but for the yawning distance ahead, it appeared surreal, an inescapable nightmare that only deepened. Light was just a courtesy now, seemingly just a sick joke that was becoming distasteful. All the waiting was what unnerved the most. Chris quickened his pace to meet up with Bill, looking back over his shoulder at Gibson with a look that said, _You'd better move your ass if you know what's good for you. _He looked back to the front: a dead end was in the distance, maybe only a gravball field or two to reach it. All the light from the corridor seemed to pool into a cone at about head-height, way out there. He then looked around for more doorways. Nothing.

"Are there more doors?" Chris said softly. He began to doubt if the Doctor could even hear him, his voice was so meek against the thudding of footsteps into rock.

The Doctor was still of little help in their inquiries, still offering no answers. Whatever it was he was planning to show them, certainly he could find the civility to give them _some _heads up. But in the moments passed, it never came. The suit of armor in front simply led the way without so much as a backward glance at any of them.

The end of the line seemed to approach suddenly, all at once. None of them except the Doctor could believe they were already here. They had reached the farthest extent of the secret mine shaft, the dead end.

Or so they thought.

The Doctor walked up a few more steps, almost coming nose-to-nose with the wall. It wasn't until the soles of the Doctor's boots met with metal grating that everyone paid more attention.

He turned around to face the group.

"Mister Reid," he said, "please come with me."

Justin looked around with a jesting sneer. "Okayâ€”and where's that to?"

"You will see."

Justin shrugged and stepped forth onto the small, two-meter squared platform of metal grating, strolling to a place near the Doctor's side. A meshed partition slid down from overhead, sealing them off from the rest of the group.

Kleiner addressed them instantly after. "Please remain where you are. You will be safe."

The flooring descended with the aid of a hydraulic motor faintly wheezing somewhere below. Within seconds, they passed below the ground and disappeared.

* * *

><p>The lift descended slowly.<p>

There was nothing to see but bare rock inching upwards on all sides. Justin looked down at the grating, straining to see past it. He was rewarded with no sight other than pitch blackness.

"So, Doctor, what kind of dog and pony show have you got lined up for me?"

"Is your group under control?"

"Excuse me?"

"The people you brought with you...are they stable? Is there anyone else you feel you must eliminate?"

"You saw that?"

"Yes. Now, can I count on your word that there will be no surprises among you?"

Justin thought about that. He killed Sergei's last man in the mines, but the Kaiser himself was still alive, still a threat in Justin's opinion, however idle the criminal-king was for the time being. But the tables had turned: not only was Kaiser Sergei alone and unarmed—and thus of little danger to anyone—he was probably equally as interested as Justin in finding out what was going on. The need to know the truth was on everyone's palette whether they chose to taste it or not.

"No surprises." Justin said. "We're ready to see what you want us to see."

"Good."

* * *

><p>Joe kept looking back.<p>

Despite the overwhelming air of safety this far into the mines, Hendricksson couldn't help but feel he and all the poor souls in his company were on borrowed time. He didn't even realize Chris' keen eyes were upon him during his constant rubber necking over his shoulder.

"Joe, you okay? What's back there?"

Joe gazed into the kid's eyes, faltering for a moment at a loss for words. "Joe." Chris beckoned.

The tension emanating from the two attracted Bill, who took notice of something in their eyes and stepped closer.

"Nothing, just a little paranoid." Joe said. "I hate waiting."

"Joe, we're under the Doctor's watch now. He's got God-like control over this mineshaft. I'm sure he'd know if anything was coming this way, and he said he had sentries too. He said we'd be safe. We have to trust him." Chris shrugged, "Little other choice now anyways, right?"

"Right. Doesn't matter if I'm calm or not. We're reduced to this situation no matter what."

"Good." Chris said. "Now tell me what's _really _bothering you."

"Pardon?"

"C'mon, Joe. You've been looking over your shoulder more than a fugitive. Ever since we met, you've been on edge about something."

"Well, yeah it's because these creaturesâ€"

"â€"Don't try it, Joe. Just come clean with me. I know."

Joe looked around and distanced himself a slight amount from the rest of the group such that he could speak comfortably and remain out of earshot. Chris and Bill followed him a moment later.

"Okay, you wanted the truth. Here it is: I came from Sirius Six-B, that's not made up. I did drift for five-hundred years, too, not made up. But I never told you everything that happened out there. Christ, I thought I'd left it all behind. I had _no _idea I brought it here with me, you have to understand that!"

"Okayâ€|calm down, Joe. It's not your fault." Bill said.

"Just tell us what happened." Chris coaxed. "Tell us what you brought here. No one's blaming you."

Joe breathed deeply. "Bill, do you remember what I said to you on the Admin building rooftop?"

"I'm sorry, refresh my memory."

"â€|That we reinvented man's first modern weapon?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"Man's first modern weapon was a sword."

"Yes, go on." Bill said.

"We made the Autonomous Mobile Sword, the Screamer." Joe's eyes widened. "It's here."

"And what is it? What does it do?"

"It's a fully automated, self-replicating killbot that propagates an area through ground. It burrows, sometimes very deeply depending on the makeup of the crust, and executes search and destroy routines. It can emerge without warning and strike its enemies with lethal precision. We designed it to do this autonomously, without supervision."

"And what are its enemies?" Chris asked.

"Anyone not wearing one of these." Joe said, holding his right hand above his waist.

Chris and Joe peered downward to where some sort of electronic device was attached to Joe's right wrist. "What is it?" Chris asked.

"It's a TAB. Transient Airwave Broadcaster. Screamers only hunt living things. They seek them out by scanning for rhythmic pulses, heartbeats. This thing broadcasts the wearer's heart rate one step out of phase, flat lining them."

"So," Chris tilted his head, "to them, you're dead."

"Yes."

"And we're fresh meat. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes."

Joe felt a sudden pang of remorse for the people that got sucked into the doom he brought here, especially upon seeing the realization showing in Chris' eyes. Joe tried very hard not to picture it, the deaths he witnessed on Sirius 6B, but he couldn't help it. He'd seen the Screamers kill all too many times, how efficient and merciless they were, robotic in their practice. Joe knew it was only a matter of time before Chris and the others would witness the blades of a Screamer first-hand and meet their true fate—a gruesome one at that. Sooner or later the TAB's batteries would expire as well—Joe would be hunted. What was strange was that Joe could be both afraid and relieved at that fact.

"So they got aboard your escape craft somehow." Chris conjectured, nodding.

"Probably just one of them." Joe said. "They're not very large, little bigger than the size of my hand. At least, that's true for the Type Ones. They must've slipped one in before I got aboard, hoping they'd carry on the survival of the species on another world."

"Wait, wait!" Chris whispered. "You said they were robots, now you're calling them a species?"

Joe clenched his jaw. "They started off as robots. But somehow they evolved."

"Evolved. Robots. I'm no scientist, Joe, but programming is programming. Without it, a machine is useless. How did something that requires precise, digital input transcend its programming?"

"They began to modify themselves somehow. A glitch in their coding, maybe, I don't know. They were designed to survive on their own. They had to adapt to their surroundings. Maybe that's nature's wrath biting us in the ass or something. It was fine until new models started showing up out of the blue. They eventually replicated human formsâ€”and to horrifying realism. There was no way to see that coming."

"What happened then?"

"They started to infiltrate our bunkers. It started with David."

"Who is David?"

"David was Type Three, a little boy with a teddy bear, ragged clothes, sad face, on the verge of starvation." Joe smiled almost playfully. "Who can resist a snot-nosed kid with a hard luck story, eh?"

"Go on."

"Both sides in the war started letting Davids into their bunkers, and that's when it started getting _really _interesting."

* * *

><p>The lift continued descending as the steady whine of hydraulic pump stations powering it became increasingly audible somewhere further below. The mechanical sound easily permeated through the porous deck plate that Justin and Doctor Kleiner stood on. With little sight to take in around him, Justin went back to scrutinizing the Doctor's power armor as discretely as he could. Now that they were standing firm, Justin could make out the finer details, suddenly noticing a firearm at the scientist's side.<p>

But it wasn't just the presence of the firearm that caught Justin's attention. Something about it was odd...how it was fastened to the metal chassis that Kleiner housed himself in. Justin tilted his head ever so slightly, feigning a creak in his neck to get a better view of the weapon. Sitting merely an inch off the surface of the metal itself, Justin could now clearly see that the firearm was in fact floatingâ€”hovering above his suit. In the midst of the shadow the weapon made on the thigh plate, Justin could just barely make out a checkerboard pattern of smaller metal pieces embedded into the alloy. The only logical explanation he could fathom was that the grid on the Doctor's outer thigh was a network of polar magnets simultaneously pulling the weapon close and pushing it away, keeping it at a precise distance.

Justin said nothing, maintained a straight face. He glanced at the setup again: he couldn't figure out which make of firearm it was. UNSC standard issue or some prototype? There was no way to be sure, no logos LASER or acid-etched onto the body of the weapon, at least none that Justin could make out from his awkward vantage. No imprints

of serial numbers as far as he could see. Maybe Justin would never know.

Before he could begin to speculate any further, the rock on all sides inching up began to disappear, now replaced by a hollowed cylinder of steel mesh—the elevator's new shaft upon transitioning into a cave. Peering out, Justin now had a 360° view: a hollowed-out hemisphere of immense volume. Far bigger than the Gravball arenas he'd played inside at Reach's academy. Compared to that, he'd never heard of or seen anything quite like this...

The very first thing that caught Justin's eye was light.

The darkness of the ambiance was neatly pierced by an oculus high above in the center from which a narrow shaft of light connected floor to ceiling. So focused was the solid-white ray, it afforded only a faint glow merely a few meters out, a natural halo flanking outwards. Inside the radiant column was a single console atop a raised platform, perfectly dead-center in the room, just a spec from where the elevator shaft was.

All around the periphery, to where his sight just about lost color and depth perception, blinking lights flashed like the stars of a cloudless night, bustling with cryptic messages. Squinting through, Justin determined as best he could that they were LEDs of computer chassis anchored to the bulwark. Whatever they represented, whatever their function was, Justin couldn't even begin to fathom. There were so many, encompassing the entire area surrounding him. Several raised platforms dotted the central area of the hemispherical expanse. Taking up much of the floor space were equipment dollies, cylindrical tanks pressurized with unknown gases, robotic exosuits and forklifts parked in cordoned-off spaces. At the furthest end, a giant vault door lay closed, an oddity to Justin at how they were currently situated above its framework and yet it towered above all else in the room. His awe shifted back and forth from the height they currently resided at to the sheer size of the place.

Normally, a human voice, or any sound for that matter, would usually reverberate off walls and produce an echo in a large enough space. The current space was so large that the amplitude from either of their voices couldn't propagate far enough to reach any of the concave walls.

"You said this was a classified research facility." Justin said.
"What are you researching?"

Before answering, the Doctor tapped a switch on a forearm-mounted interface. Upon the Doctor's command, loud clanking could be heard all around the circumference of the room. Justin looked outward in time to see hexagonal plates of highly-transmissive mirror pivot into place as more near the central pedestal below repositioned. The light instantly refracted from the reflective plates below and neatly struck all peripheral mirrors, lighting up virtually every square inch of the immense facility.

"We're researching extraterrestrial biological entities. EBEs."

"The parasites." Justin said rhetorically. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Since before the planet was settled."

"What are they doing here? How did they get here?"

"You saw the massive hangar door at the far end. Beyond there is the vessel that crash-landed here some millennia ago. Based on all the evidence we've obtained, it's our logical assumption that they wound up here by that means. We've yet to attain an accurate Carbon-Fourteen dating."

Justin looked out over the expanse of machinery and electronics spanning below them as they descended, regarding the massive blast-grade doors far away whose shape was almost obscured by the sheer distance. "I'm guessing that's not part of the tour."

"You guess right, Mister Reid. It's highly classified. Even though you'll never leave the planet, courtesy of the company, you don't need to see it."

"So why research it? Why not destroy it?" Justin suddenly pivoted to look into the suit's faceplate. "You're developing bioweapons."

"I'm not developing anything. I'm here to conduct research."

"Bullshit."

"What my benefactors do with my data findings is up to them whether it's make bioweapons or sing Cumbaya. I get paid to research and offer professional opinions, Mister Reid. My conscience will be clear."

"Christ, that's how these things start. Don't you get it? You're helping them get what they want."

The Doctor gave no reply.

"Now why am I here?"

"You're here to help me answer some questions."

"I don't see how I could possibly be of help to you."

"Allow me to persuade you. Somehow, a copious amount of infection forms under study in one of the observation chambers escaped quarantine. And they chased you. For reasons unknown to me or my AI, you have an involvement with the EBEs in some way. It would be in your best interests to tell me exactly what it is, then I can be in a position to help you as well."

"A deal?"

"Yes."

"What do you offer?"

"Weapons. That is what you originally came into the mines for."

Justin nodded and looked the Doctor in the eyes, unable to see the

lower half of his face due to the obscuring helmet. "That's right."

Tell me how it is you came in contact with the specimens."

"Well, it all started one night in my home, many miles from here. We were under the influence of some pretty strong hallucinogens"

"Who is we?"

"Me and everyone you see with me, except Joe Hendricksson. He arrived to this planet well after that night."

"That's the individual that crash-landed outside the mine entrance."

"Yes."

"Go on."

"Well, it was actually Pete who came in contact with them first, not me."

"And where is Pete now? Is he with you, here among your group? I would like to discuss this with him present. What does he look like?"

"Let's see," Justin said, "he's got two eyes, a mouth, and a nose right in the middle of his fuckin' face—which is probably halfway decomposed by now. How's that? Does that sound familiar?"

"I'm sorry, did you say he's dead?"

"He was the very first victim of your parasite outbreak."

Justin could see the Doctor's cold, almost empty, ice-blue eyes stare back through the clear faceplate and take on a shape that passed for genuine sorrow. "I am sorry."

"You're sorry?" Justin trailed off. "You're not sorry. If you were sorry, you wouldn't still be doing this job. Hell, you wouldn't have taken this job in the first place. We say we're sorry only because we hate watching others suffer, but sorry means nothing here, Doctor. I'm afraid it's too little, too late. What's sorry gonna do for Pete now?"

"Yes—we'll"

"Just get on with the inquisition, Doctor. Get to the part where you help me."

"Listen here, I don't even know how they escaped. I had no idea they were out there until I started seeing them on City Seventeen's CCTV! But perhaps you know something more!"

"Right. Well, the night it happened. Let's see—I woke up and found Pete alone in the dark, resting up against the heater vent pipe in my home. I turned the lights on and the next thing I knew, he was getting eaten alive by those bastards. They came from underground. I

had nothing to do with their escapeâ€|until later."

"_So_," the Doctor's voice emitter boomed, "the truth comes out! You did have something to do with the quarantine breach."

"God damnit, Doctor, it wasn't my fault! Something woke them, I know it! It's your fault you built your observation chamber right under my house!"

"Exactly when did you build your house?" the Doctor leveled his eyes at Justin.

"Ten fucking years ago. I was among the first here."

"This facility was constructed _thirteen_ years ago. You built your house directly over one of _my_ observation chambers and shoved a veritable escape hatch into it. Whatever it was your Pete did to arouse them, he bears the responsibility of their escape, not me."

"Fine, the argument is settled then. But he's dead now, so your PhD doesn't get to pin the tail on _this_ donkey, no sir. And how could I have known your pet science project was gonna be buried under my house? Asswipe."

The Doctor huffed in frustration, his regulated air supply compensating for the sudden change of internal pressure by venting a short burst of CO2 from an O-ringed spigot near his voice emitter. "How could this happen?" he said absentmindedly.

Justin said sternly, "You can't control everything. No one can."

* * *

><p>"We should've never let those Screamers loose the way they were built. It was the perfect short-term solution, but we found out soon enough that we couldn't control them. Jesus, we created an entire new race of sentient lifeâ€|born of transistors and scrap metal and fucking razor blades!"<p>

"Joe, c'mon." Chris coaxed, patting Hendricksson on the back. "You need to calm down. You said only one got in with you. That's not so bad. How tough are they? Can they be killed?"

Joe picked his gaze up off the floor. "Yes." he said with new resolve. "The Type One model can easily be killed. But it's smart enough to avoid outside contact for now. Its plan is to find safetyâ€|and start breeding. It'll find a way to copy itself. More and more Type Ones will show up before long. And then it's only a matter of time before more advanced models start appearing. Only a matter of time."

"We'll make sure we have the weapons to deal with them, Joe. Plus, we're safe inside these mines under the Doctor's protection."

"I hope."

* * *

><p>The elevator reached the bottom, though neither the Doctor or

Justin stepped off.<p>

"This was fool-proof." the Doctor said, grimacing at the ground beneath his armored boots. "The contagion wasn't supposed to be released unto the planet _years _from now."

"What the fuck?" Justin grabbed the Doctor by the armored shoulder. "You were planning to unleash this shit on Traxus Nine to begin with?"

"It wasn't my idea. I had no knowledge of that going into this assignment." Justin let go of the Doctor, almost pushing him back as he did. "I'm just acting under orders. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, I understand quite well, Doctor. But why do your superiors want to do this?"

Kleiner relaxed his stance and shifted his weight.

"When the planet was first surveyed, estimates put the sum total mass of geological resources right at about fifteen years' usage before depletion. After that, the planet's useless. You passed peak production two point five years ago. Much earlier than expected."

"Of course no one tells us these things too, right?"

"No one on this planet would know. Not even your town administrators have this knowledge."

"So just let it all free-roam? Is that what's next?"

"Traxus Nine is restricted and hasn't been listed in the Colonial Register for nearly ten years. The operational parameters were then modified." Kleiner raised his head and spoke loud monotone as though he were reading from text or reciting what someone higher up had directed. "...Set the experieiment loose for the ultimate venue in real-world, uncontrolled study..."

"...Those are now my orders. _Will be _my orders once they feel I can't discover anything new."

"Takes care of society's worst in the process."

"An unopposed byproduct of the project for them. They'll wipe their hands clean when it's all done. There'll be no survivors. No witnesses. Just nothing. Only death."

Justin smiled in amazement. "Unbelievable. Sadistic and at the same time so efficient. So, Doctor, what now?"

"We discuss your survival."

* * *

><p>"They've been down there quite a long time." Chris stated.<p>

"The Doc is showing Justin the ropes, that's all." Kaiser Sergei

smiled.

"How are you smiling at a time like this?" Chris shouted. "In fact, you're _always _smiling no matter what. Does nothing have any consequence to you?"

"Kid, when are you gonna realize...living here, on this planet, the only thing that matters is survival. It's a wonder I'm even sharing this with you, as smart as you already are."

Ken stepped forward and placed his body between the two of them. "You," he glanced at Sergei, "shut up. Chris, let it go. Everyone, fucking be patient." Ken's voice was level and cold, calculative. "We wait here per the Doctor's orders. He wouldn't have taken Justin down there alone unless he wanted to help him, as he said he would. Answers are coming. Until then, everyone stay here and keep the banter to a minimum."

"Look at this," Sergei chuckled, "a spokesperson for the clandestine agency already. Securing a position in the new regime?"

* * *

><p>"Your friend, Pete, bares the blame of letting loose the infection forms. That much is certain. But it doesn't matter anymore, what's done is done. What we have to concentrate on now is how you and your people will survive this premature outbreak."<p>

"First, Doctor, two things: what are 'infection forms'; and why are you helping us survive this if we're to be condemned to death in a few years anyway?"

"I respect you. I wish this never happened, and I wish for peoples' survival. But I can't guarantee anything in my capacity here. And while I must follow orders, it doesn't mean I always agree with them. I can certainly use what powers I have to save the few that I can. So long as I have that power, I will use it for whatever good is left. That good is you."

"I'm honored that we're your vessels of redemption and all, Doctor, but from what I've seen these little EBEs of yours can take a helluva beating. There's only so much guns and ammo to go around and these critters seem to keep multiplying every time they get near people. What makes you think we'll be able to beat them?"

"I did not say you could beat them. I only said you could survive them. You must find a way to seal off a city from within and take indefinite refuge there. I would offer to take you with me, but my ship has only room for meâ€"one life support system. I am sorry."

"Sorry? Well, why not just send a bigger ship back here when you return home? You could rig us up a ride outta here. We can survive long enough 'till then."

"I'm afraid that is out of the question, Mister Reid. Not only would my employers get wind of it and reprimand me, but they would see to it that you never leave this placeâ€"as is already the case for all denizens of Traxus Nine. The work accomplished here is of the most highly classified nature. Your very existence off-world would mean a

threat to them."

"But they wouldn't know I was in here unless you told them."

"Wrong. Everything here is monitored, Mr. Reid. Not just by me. The recordings of everything taking place here are transmitted via slipspace probes to the central office."

"Soâ€¦|doesn't that mean you're in trouble right now just by letting me in here?"

"No. I requested you be let in for research purposes."

Justin backed away from the Doctor, assuming a defensive fighting stance. "What's _that _mean?" Justin began to reach beneath his coat for a weapon.

"Not what you're thinking. You witnessed the parasites before all others in City Seventeen. You had first contact with them."

Justin eased his stance and shifted his weight. "Pete did."

"Yes, that's right. Pete." the Doctor corrected himself. "What this reduces to is that I needed some answers. And I believe I got them from you just now. That is all."

Justin exhaled the breath he'd been holding for the last few seconds. "It's quite the tease, Doctor. Watching you leave while we ride it out."

"My hands are tied."

"Devil's advocate? Just a little here?"

"Foregoing the fact that escape is a near-impossibility, you'd be hunted down if you did...and for the rest of your life. It wouldn't stop there, oh no. They'd interrogate any friends and family of yours that they have files of, and they know _exactly _where to obtain such information if they didn't already possess it. And interrogation is definitely an open meaning here. I am sorry, I'm not trying to frighten you or threaten you, but that's just the way it is with these people. There is no solution here other than what I am offering."

"Who's employing you down here?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"What's the difference? We'll never have the chance to leave this place!"

"A conglomerate of corporations and private investors."

"If the government knew what was going on hereâ€¦|"

"Someone in the government knows _perfectly _well what's going on here, Mister Reid. Traxus is sanctioned by the government in many sectors of industry for many of its projects, people just don't know it. But it's of little concern to us now. The real concern is empowering you to combat these creatures. That is my last good deed

here as a scientistâ€|as a human being."

"Let's get on with it then."

"Very well, follow me."

* * *

><p>"Soâ€|can you tell us what they look like?" Chris asked. "Not trying to bring back any memories, just want to know one when I see one."<p>

"The Type One, the one that _we _made, looked pretty simple. Just a rotary blade for a head and tunneling appendages flanking it, a middle section that housed the electronics and a tail rudder that was used when it burrowed. This is most likely the one they slipped aboard my ship prior to me escaping. The first modified Screamer was Type One Revised. It looked more like an animal, like some overgrown rat. Had legs that enabled it to actually walk around on hard surfaces, whereas the original ones were just burrowers. Had the same buzz saw on its head, but it also had retracting connectors to hack into computer terminals. This was when I started to notice something strange.

"And then, David, Type Three. That small boy, Jesus. He was so real. You'd mistake him for a neighbor you hadn't yet met, he was so real. He, it, was responsible for taking the most lives out of all the Screamers. An infiltrator design, pure and simple, because you'd never suspect anything was off until you were dying of disembowelment."

"Wait," Chris said, "you mentioned Type One, the Type One Revised, and the Type Three, the boy, but you skipped one. What about Type Two?"

"Yes, Type Two. Where to beginâ€|"

* * *

><p>Justin walked on the Doctor's lead as they cleared the elevator platform. It was seamlessly embedded into the bedrock, allowing for an equally seamless transition as he walked again. Justin glanced all about as he followed, keen to take in as much detail as possible. They were on a course that bisected the floor space, their vector straight on towards the central pedestal. The light pouring in from the oculus above now struck the network of steerable mirrors in such a way that the cave was divided: upper half saturated with luminosity, the lower half merely benefiting from its resultant glow. The byproduct was a well-lit ambiance with zero glare unless he gazed straight up.<p>

There was a bit of walking to do in getting there, Justin now knew. He craned his neck over a cluster of human-sized containers to his right, noting the display screens against the concave wall far off. He squinted and focused and willed his eye muscles to strain, finally rewarded with a portrait of a humanoid figure taking up a single screen. Fighting even harder for visual acuity, he could make out the dreaded whip-like extensions sprouted out of the digital figure's motionless arms.

"So, Doctor, you never told me about the creatures themselves."

"What would you like to know?"

"Anything you can tell me. The more intel I have, the better chance I stand in surviving. And that's what you want to ease your conscience."

Together, Doctor Kleiner and Justin Reid finally reached the center console. Bathed in light from above, Justin lost focus of the room around him. He could only make out the Doctor's movements as he immediately began accessing the central holoterminal. A slew of height-staggered controls resided just before the Doctor, projected from the aperture at about waist height. He tapped his right index finger at thin air, actuating a series of the controls. The blue-tinged representations shifted red. "The process of infection starts with the infection form."

Instantly, the light from above attenuated roughly 50%, allowing Justin to see a giant, curved screen mounted to a section of the concave periphery far away. On display was an illustration of a parasitic creature, the infection form, the creature that had plagued Justin's recent days.

"The small bastards that invite themselves into peoples' mid section." Justin confirmed.

"Precisely. The parasite can quickly garner a host as you well know by now. Evidence shows that it attacks the central nervous system of sentient beings."

"Sentient?"

"Yes, quite interesting that the EBEs prefer to assimilate self-aware animals into their collective. For what purpose, I do not yet know. More research is required, but deductive logic from all the observations tells me that they require an intelligent host in order to utilize them more effectively. It also seems apparent that a certain amount of biomass is needed to sustain any of the forms' commands and movements. We've tested various animals for assimilation—none of them were viable candidates for the parasites. But make no mistake, once the creature grabs a hold of what it wants, there is no escape from it. Within a very short period, the victim will morph into the combat form. You have encountered these as well."

Justin looked on again to the giant display looming in the distance. Taking the parasite's side was the combat form, a taxonomical chart-like display of a menacing and grotesque and all the more life-like monster as it towered over him and the Doctor.

"So, the infection form takes control of a human, the human becomes the combat form...where did all the humans come from? How did the infection forms get such a huge supply down here? Or do I even _want _to know, Doctor?"

"It was purely chance that it happened, many years before any settlements here. All combat forms you see here were once members of the CMA's ADVON team. Team Baker-Four, if I recall

correctly."

"CMA." Justin said. "The Colonial Military Administration? Dang, that was an age ago. They got absorbed into the UNSC, right?"

"Yes. Precisely."

"So what is the ADVON team?"

"Advanced Echelon, made up of miners, geologists, biologists, terraforming consultants, anyone you'd need to get a planet up and running. They go in small, tactical teams actively surveying and cataloguing worlds. Most of their work is done, but there may be some remnants of the ADVON units still out there. Though, I would hazard a guess that their business has slowed or stopped altogether since the War came about."

"They came here, dug a little too deep, home base loses all contact, military comes in with a search and rescue, and bam...the whole incident goes dark and red tape prevents anyone from getting close."

"Astute observation, Mister Reid."

"I suspected you were the bad guy ever since I got down here. Guess I'm wrong...so far."

"No, I'm not the bad guy. I'm just the egghead trying to find the answers. In fact, I'm not sure there really is a bad guy in this situation."

"...THI." Justin said darkly. "They're the bad guy. For turning this place into what it is. And for turning these fuckers loose on people!"

"I cannot comment, but I understand your anger. I'm going to do everything I can to help you here. Shall we go over more in regards to the combat form?"

"Yes, please."

"The enlarged myceliums you see protruding from the host's arms and torso are usually its primary means of attack. We've seen biters as well when they're stripped of their tentacles, but that does not last very long; they're able to regenerate them very quickly. The smaller hyphae extending from the torso act as sensory organs that the parasite uses in place of the host's nerve endings. Being a Fungi-based species, the hyphae can be formed to transduce any external stimuli it wishesâ€"infrared, optical, anything. Compared to us, its resolution of the world around it is far more accute. Now, sometimes the human host's features are totally unrecognizable after assimilation, depending on how quickly the parasite takes over and what it does with its new body. Many times, victim's faces are covered in the parasite's excess skin. Together, in enough numbers, these creatures are quite effective in eradicating whatever they see fit. They can adapt to their surroundings, alter the host's body to fabricate organic weapons, they've even displayed intelligence on par with humans. I've seen them activate switch plates, I've seen them spell out words in sand, tap Morse Code into rock, I've seen many astounding things. This truly is a remarkable species we're dealing

with."

"We encountered something else, Doctor. Something you may not have seen."

"You did? What?"

"It was a creature that could change itself."

"Yes, the combat form. I've already told you that."

"No. This one was different. You didn't see this one because there were no monitoring devices where we encountered it. The first form it took was more like a cocoon. It hung from the ceiling and shot these hard, sharp spears that were harvested from its own body. We ran away when we first saw it. The next time we ran into it, we had better weapons, but this time it turned into a giant spider. As if that weren't the shit in our oatmeal, it turned into a giant fucking zombie the next time we blinked. I mean, it was gargantuan and it happened in an instant. It was damn near invincible to every shot we placed on it. Shotguns at point blank, assault rifles, you name it. Indestructible."

"Oh my, you encountered a pure form." The Doctor brought his gloved hands together and his fingers started dancing over one another. "I was hoping it wouldn't happen so soon."

"Pure form? I don't like the sound of that, Doctor."

"Forgive the nomenclature. For ease of identification, I've created a dumbed-down, rudimentary set of terminologies representing the many different sub-species. I've coined an appropriate set of taxonomical bi-nomenclatures to go along as well, but they're in Latin so I'll just give you the simple versions, okay?"

Justin started to sense dread from Doctor Kleiner. "Okay. So what exactly is a pure form?"

"It possesses an enforcer type of role within this EBE community. It seems as though the collective will cultivate a leadership organism once it reaches a certain mass much in the way a bee colony would select a queen. But the way in which they create this particular organism is quite unlike the common process. Its creation is quite different than, say, an infection form or combat form. The combat forms, or drone units, will create this leadership by pooling massive amounts of dead biomass and introducing the virus at a later stage. Whereas an infection form would seize a host body through infusion of the contagion, the pure form is instead composed entirely of recycled bones and flesh. In your case, it was the victims in the factories."

"So, the pure form is harder to destroy than the regular ones because it's condensed mass. That explains our defeat."

"Yes, its physiological makeup of saturated biomass renders it quite resilient against traditional kinetic weaponry. Thus, I would avoid using it against this EBE form. Gas-propelled projectile firearms will do you little good, even moderate ordinance. Even if equipped with the proper armament, it's extremely risky to confront one; I would always avoid it if possible."

"That, I intend to do."

"Now, the pure form is of the same base strain of the organism, but as you witnessed, it can mutate its genetic code on the fly. We've recorded three distinct permutations of the pure form, all of which you must've experienced. We know that this form represents one of the more advanced stages in the EBE's evolutionary path as a community grows. It's designed to withstand extremely harsh environments and enemies, and in my opinion, it is one of the most dangerous forms of the species."

"Waitâ€|_one _of the most dangerous? You mean there's worse?"

"Only one."

* * *

><p>Everyone topside of Justin and the Doctor were all sitting down at this point, exhaustion from standing and boredom from nothing to do creeping in. For the time being, Ken sat next to Layla with a steady eye on Kaiser Sergei, who merely smiled every time his eyes met Ken's. A smile akin to the Devil's own. Chris and Bill were off a ways from the rest. They sat Indian style and listened closely as Joe continued to whisper his story of the Screamers.<p>

"What did it look like?" Chris asked. "â€|the Type Two."

"Anything you wanted it to." Joe answered. "If you were in your golden years and had a photo of your grandmother out in the open, you might just see her resurrected from the dead if you were living on Sirius Six-B when the Type Twos rolled out."

"Oh my God." Chris' eyes went wide.

Bill forgave Chris' vein use of the Lord's name and pressed further into Joe's world.

"The most horrifying aspect of it all, and also the most amazing, is that Screamers advanced so much that they showed emotion. They modified themselves, mimicked us to such precision that they could love one another, love _humans_, kill one another over jealousy. They were arguably human at that point. The survivors I was withâ€|I couldn't tell who was real or machine by the time I contemplated leaving. It was by the skin of my teeth that I did."

"Amazing." Bill said.

"So," Joe said, "the Screamers, born by their human creators to kill, empowered by them to choose its own course, did. They became what they never should have: Human."

* * *

><p>"What do you call that one?" Justin asked incredulously.
"God-of-the-dead-form or something?"<p>

"I've only coined the bi-nomenclature for it. Whether that sees publication..."

"And?"

"Inferi Sententia." the Doctor said.

"Translate."

"Thinking Dead."

"Show me."

"Very well. I should warn you, it's a very disturbing sight to see. But then again, you will never encounter it again as there seems to be only one within the collective at any given time."

"So it's clearly the leader then."

"Yes. You're _sure _you want to see it?"

"We'll be safe?"

"Of course." the Doctor said, stepping off the raised platform.

Justin followed, and as soon as he took his last step off the center section the staccato rattle of a mirror-symphony filled the room as well as full brightness a fraction of second later. Appearing before the Doctor's footsteps, the ground glowed a bright red, guiding him on a path straight to the massive bay doors in the distance.

"Thought you said you wouldn't be taking me in there, Doctor."

"I've made certain you will only see what I want you to see. You'll understand in a minute."

Justin continued on his lead, looking around the chamber once more. The giant view screens towering above him all around the circumference were totally dark, displaying nothing. In under a minute, they reached the massive vault.

The Doctor once again keyed his forearm-mounted interface, shouting, "Elias Kleiner, entry access code, gold miner seven, option beta."

A disembodied voice called through hidden speakers, "How are you feeling today, Doctor?"

The Doctor paused momentarily before answering the simple question. "Under the weather. Thank you for asking."

"Access granted. Please proceed."

The Doctor glanced over to Justin as a single klaxon roared in the rear quartile of the cavern, the sound appropriately attenuated and not harsh on the ears. "Almost forgot the second password." he chuckled. "The facility's artificial intelligence, Avanesh. Lord of the underworld in Hindu culture. My eyes and ears here."

"Fancy, Doctor." Justin said dryly.

Kleiner did not reply, looked straight on as the massive blast doors

split and slowly opened outward towards them. Justin thought it odd how such massive workings emitted almost no sound when they moved. No creaking, dragging, groaning, just a smooth angular rotation acting upon the hinge pins— as massive as himself. Justin watched as the doors showed their cross section upon reaching 45° angularity, about two meters thick by his guess. Nothing could penetrate that other than some celestial event of epic proportions.

The doors stopped in place, sitting perfectly perpendicular from their rest point.

The Doctor stood in place and regarded Justin for a moment.

"After you, Doctor. _You're_ in the lead."

Kleiner proceeded forward, his bulky armor once again pounding into bedrock as they left the smooth deck of the Doctor's giant command chamber.

Directly ahead of them, another massive portal loomed, this one shielded by a protective blast screen made of a fine-woven metal, reminding Justin much of City 17's gate at the tunnel. "So that's the real classified stuff beyond there?"

"Yes." the Doctor replied. "Follow me to the left."

It was a T-junction they now occupied just inside the cavern's blast doors. A corridor to the left, to the right, and the shielded room to the front. Justin hurriedly followed after the Doctor to the left, once again striding up beside him.

The corridor was long and perfectly straight, very little light emanating from the scone-like, electroluminescent light panels at regular intervals. They barely shone the way forward. Justin could just about make out the door at the end. It was solid metal, unfathomably thick. The size of a standard door frame, it could easily pass Justin through but he knew the Doctor would have a hard time clearing it in his suit. The security was fairly simple, just a rotary lever-lock. Maybe Justin possessed enough strength to deactivate it, but he wasn't about to try.

Justin felt the air drop a few degrees colder. The taste of it also grew a little stale, like a house that had not been maintained in years, no occupants. The image of layers of dust over antique possessions sprang in Justin's mind at the scent, like a trip he used to take during winters to his grandparents' house in rural Reach. He focused back on the door, merely a few footsteps away now. He was ready to see.

The Doctor used his power suit to wrap both hands around the lever and shoved it counter-clockwise. But he hadn't yet opened it. He glanced sidelong at Justin through a half-shown faceplate. "Don't say I didn't warn you. This may be too much. Let me know if it is, I'll take you out of here."

Justin nodded.

The Doctor pushed open the door and the stale scent saturated Justin's nostrils threefold, the air around him having zero humidity. "Climate controlled." Justin said more to himself, glancing in all

directions as he stepped past the threshold. The Doctor was inside momentarily as he had to bend down to get inside it.

The room was dark, Justin could barely see, save for the dim glow beyond a large transparent glass screen. The room he occupied was incredibly small for a sight he surmised was the most important yet. It was an observation room, one way in and one way out. There was nothing to behold but the faint light beyond the window.

The ex-Marine glanced behind him to see the Doctor closing the door shut. He then waited for Kleiner to take his place in the room, wherever that was. Once the typical thudding of his footsteps stopped, Justin realized that place was right next to him, which was a comfort of some sort.

Justin swung his eyes back to the screen in front, nothing much visible beyond it except fine dust lingering in the air and the usual makeup of rocks and boulders and pebbles, the dim glow hardly helping his human vision.

"What are we waiting for, Doc?" Justin shifted his weight precariously.

"Just wait." the Doctor said.

Justin glanced into the side of the Doctor's faceplate. He thought he perceived a smile starting to form at the corner of the scientist's lips. He placed his sight back to the frontâ€|

Situated ahead just beyond the window now, throbbing and pulsating, Justin took in the sight of the largest and most frightening creature he'd ever laid eyes on.

He suppressed the urge to jump back if only for the Doctor's presence aloneâ€"who exuded no reaction to this creature whatsoever. This was obviously routine for him.

"The leader." Justin said, exhaling a stack of air slowly.

"Quite the sight to see, isn't it?"

"You're absolutely sure we're safe."

"Absolutely." the Doctor said in an instant.

Detecting no hesitation in the Doctor's voice, Justin inched forward. As the glass pane grew larger in size, doubly did the creature looming over him as it advanced to meet Justin there, towering from floor to ceiling, appearing squeezed at the top. Justin, now with his nose practically to the glass, brought his right hand to bear and tapped a knuckle onto the clear plate. He was rewarded with absolutely no sound in report, telling him that this glass pane was incredibly thick. He once again let go of pent-up breath. He examined its many extremities, which had the girth of palm tree stalks, the same brownish-green motif and slick with the moist slime typical of its kin.

But something in the way the monster moved, the rhythmic gyrations of its various tentacles, it told Justin that immense strength was on tap. Why then, had the monster not yet displayed it was a mystery to

him. Maybe it already tried that, learned of its futile attempts to escape such imprisonment before. Looking dead ahead now, Justin gazed past all the writhing limbs and saw what could pass for a face, something to connect with. Looking more like a giant clamshell, the partitions of upper and lower mandibles were seen, partially obscured by agitated dust from all the movement in the airtight chamber beyond the glass. The rest of the 'face' was totally invisible if there was one, the eyes merely appearing as twin shadows further back. But the mouth was there. It began to moveâ€|

* * *

><p>Gibson stirred where he sat. "This isn't right. We're not sticking to the plan. This is wrong."<p>

"What?" Ken said, glancing over with a scorn.

"We should've had weapons in our hands by now! Lot's of 'em!"

"Quit your bitching." Layla shouted. "Justin's still down there in case you haven't been paying attention."

"Listen here, you little bitchâ€"

Gibson suddenly silenced himself as he became cognizant of a large shadow looming over him. He looked up and saw Joe Hendricksson standing there, towering above, nothing on the man's face, the empty eyes boring into him.

"Hey. I don't know you all that well, but I would advise you to listen to your friends here. You're part of this group now, just like me. Justin is obviously the leader. You should respect that even in his absence."

"Who the _Hell _are you anyway?" Gibson croaked.

"Who I am is not important. I shouldn't even be alive, which means I'm _very _thankful to be that way right now. Which also means that I'm not gonna let you fuck up our chances of survival by high-tailing it outta here and pissing off that Doctor! So, SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Joe walked away.

Gibson glanced at the many faces glancing at him. They were anything but friendly. He mumbled something inaudible into his lap before lying down for more rest.

Once Joe took his seat next to Chris and Bill again, he regarded Gibson briefly before he whispered, "You know, he is kind of right. Justin has been down there pretty long. Wouldn't we have at least heard something by now? Something over the speaker system in this place? This is getting pretty unnerving."

Chris shrugged. So did Bill.

"You guys are no help." Joe chuckled.

"Call me ambitious," Chris said a moment later, "but I think we're about to get a better set of weapons than rockets and guns. The

Doctor said he wanted to _help _us. If he wanted us dead, surely we'd have been that way by now. Butâ€|"

"What?" Bill said.

"â€|I just wonder what the Hell it is they're talking about down there."

* * *

><p>To have immortality
It's the question of ages
>A choice will be made by all:
Live as fools, live as
sages_

_Defy your Gods here and now
>Do not even raise your brow
Consequence is but for fools
>Bleed your day and break the rules

The observation room was deathly silent as the mouth stopped moving.

Justin tried to ponder the meaning of the words just spoken by the creature, lending more thought to the voice this time around. It was indeed the same voice that had somehow reached him time and time again. It was never a pleasant experience, but now it was different upon making this introduction. Even though the glass in front was surely soundproof, the words emanating through the room's audio setup conveyed a certain quality to the sound, as if the voice ran through Justin like a wave rather than simply filling his ears. The nausea that usually accompanied the voice was not present as well, making this experience more palatable and thus memorable. Almost every time it invaded his thoughts, the result was total blackout. This was practically a welcomed occurrence with the voice's very source compared to times before.

"What is it trying to say?"

"We've heard such words before. There is no explanation at this time. Its command of our language is astounding nevertheless. One detail that is quite striking is that it will always speak words in iambic septameter. It never fails."

"I could tell you a whole shit load of crazy stuff it's said to me."

The Doctor instantly pivoted to face Justin. "Excuse me?"

"This bastard has quite the vocab. And it's particularly wild to hear it while you're tripping off whatever the Hell's growing at the mine entrance."

"Mr. Reid, are you joking with me right now?"

Justin said straightforwardly, "No. Why would I?"

"You mean to say that this EBE has spoken to you before?"

"Absolutely. No mistaking a voice like that. Same kind of word choice too. But then again, Doctor, I was high. Don't lend too much thought

to it, kay?"

"No, this is truly remarkable if what you say is true."

"Of course it's true."

"I must know for certain if this is possible."

"Doctor, I really don't want to stay here too long. I'm gonna take your advice and fortify the shit out of City Seventeen before you open the flood gates years from now."

"Fine, very well. I cannot keep you here, but know that if you offered just a little more of your time, you'd be contributing to perhaps the greatest scientific discovery in over a century!"

"I'm confident you can find a reason for it, Doc. Let's get me and my friends outta here."

"Very well," the Doctor said striding towards the door, "please follow me."

Before Justin complied, he turned to face it one last time, the Doctor standing by the closed hatch.

"Doctor, can it see us?"

Kleiner smiled. "No. The window is one-way."

"You mean, it can't see us, but it can sense us?"

"Amazing, yes?"

"I'm not sure I would call it that."

"It cannot harm you behind there. But, you see, its sensory perception is highly evolved. As large as this creature is in its advanced state, the fungal extremities have attained a highly specialized set of distinct functions. It's probably able to sense you coming from the elevator shaft—it's _that _sensitive to its environment."

"It shouldn't be allowed to be that evolved."

"And yet, nature took its own course when this EBE came into being."

"How does one kill a superbug like this?"

"That's not on our agenda, Mr. Reid. Our charge is to study it, nothing more."

"Tell me you'll never release this thing onto Traxus Nine like the others. Please."

"Of that, you can be certain of. As smart as it is, it's better off locked up for its entire lifespan, which we also cannot accurately predict at this time."

"Thirteen years of research, Doctor, and you still know very little

of your enemy."

"Granted, but don't think of them as our enemy. Yes, they will attempt to assimilate any human and even reanimate the dead, but they could prove to be extremely useful. The Jellyfish, the venomous snakes, and the countless other deadly species in the galaxy all possess some sort of worth to us, a counter-trait that balances out their tendency to inflict harm on us. Imagine what we could learn from just this _one_ EBE."

"Well, here's hoping I never have to see it, or hear from it again. Now, what's this you were saying about surviving?"

"Yes, if you're through here, we'll stock you up with the finest anti-EBE weaponry we currently have. Just don't tell anyone where you got it from, eh?"

"Not a problem."

Doctor Kleiner opened the hatch and Justin spun on his heel, heading out of the room—something happened. A gut feeling inside Justin. The nausea was back. He felt the voice coming again—this time not through loudspeakers.

"Oh my God." Justin involuntarily mumbled. "It's back."

"What is back?" the Doctor furrowed his brow.

Justin slowly knelt to the ground, preparing for another out of body experience that would leave him motionless and incapable of standing like times before.

And then it happened.

More like a chant from a monkish choir of a thousand voices, it hummed—

Do not trust, you must join us. Do not trust, you must join us.

It repeated over and over, a steady rhythm that pounded away at Justin's own inner voice and consciousness. He began to fade away all over again, blackness at the edges of his vision before the Doctor came rushing to.

"What is wrong?" Kleiner asked.

At first, Justin couldn't respond. He had no will power for the moment, but his eyes held some amount of lucidity. He had a vague grasp of the present situation, though all he could really hear was the chanting. _Do not trust, you must join us._

"I don't know how to treat you if you don't tell me what's wrong!" the Doctor screamed as he knelt next to Justin.

"Do not trust." Justin whispered, the breath barely escaping his lungs. "You must...j-join us. Do not trust, you must join us!"

An instant later, the voice of the being resounded into the chamber through the loudspeakers, "DO NOT TRUST, YOU MUST JOIN US!"

The Doctor hoisted Justin off the ground with the aid of his power armor and whisked him out of the observation room.

32. Revelations and Parting Gifts

Revelations and Parting Gifts****

"What happened down there?"

"What's wrong with him?"

"When did it happen?"

"What's down there?"

"There's no color in his face!"

"What is down there?"

"He's not moving!"

"Give us answers now!"

"_Please_" the Doctor shouted over the group.

Silence soon consumed them all as did the light from the oculus above. Everyone except Kaiser Sergei was becoming borderline belligerent. The Doctor peeled his angered gaze away from the survivors and placed it delicately onto Justin's prone, motionless form at the base of the holopedestal. "He is fine, I assure you. His biometrics are perfectly normal, just an elevated heart rate. His symptoms are clearly psychological."

"Brain-washing," the Kaiser said, "he's already had too much of that."

Chris spun on a heel to face him. "Shut the Hell up." He faced back to the Doctor who was towering over all of them in the power armor—its metallic skin shining like an ancient war trophy in the light from above. "Doctor, what happened down there? What caused this?"

"I don't know. The extraterrestrial biological entity I showed him triggered some sort of traumatic response in his brain, maybe a repressed memory. We can only know for sure once he awakes."

"_If _he awakes." Layla scorned the Doctor. "Look at him."

"I'm awake." Justin said, slowly pushing himself off the floor.

"Justin!" Layla shouted, rushing to his side. "Oh my God, I thought you were hurt. You're okay?"

"I'm fine. How long have I been out?" Justin stood to full height and looked the group over with a pale, drained face. Layla stared back at his features with concern despite full lucidity outshining his eyes.

"About an hour." Doctor Kleiner replied. "Do you remember anything prior to the incident?"

"Of course I do. How could I forget something like that?"

"That is good news." the Doctor leaned closer. "I'd very much like to ask you some questions if you don't mind."

"Do what you want, but I'm getting as far away from that thing as I can. Now seal off that chamber and get me those weapons, Doctor."

Chris' eyes were transfixed on the massive vault door at the end of the dome's radius. "What thing?" he asked. "What did you see?"

"You _don't _wanna know." Justin brushed the dirt off his clothes and coughed once.

"No," Chris said, "I _do_ want to know! You said back there that knowing was more important than anything. More important than getting weapons, more important than escape. All this talk lately about teamwork and cooperationâ€|God damn it! I feel very out of the loop!"

"Fine, you wanna know what's in there?"

"Yes!"

"The head of the snake. You seem so eager to discuss it..." Justin stared at the elevator before walking off. "Well, we ain't gonna do it here."

Justin parted the group of onlookers standing around him and strode across the room to the lift lying in wait. The cavernous chamber was near-silent save for the plethora of fans extracting heat from the fins of methanol-filled radiators. The Doctor looked the group over while he sent the command for the vault to close, Justin waiting with arms crossed far away on the lift platform.

"Everyone, stay where you are. Do not touch _anything_."

"Where are you two going?" Chris asked incredulously, craning his neck upwards to look the Doctor in the eye.

"I need to speak to Justin alone for a moment. When I'm done, you can talk to him all you like before you get ready to leave."

The Doctor paced away from the well-lit platform, his suit one with the surrounding darkness as the remaining survivors remained in the light. He eventually made his way to Justin's side and the lift ascended an instant later.

"Leave?" Chris shouted. "We just got here!"

"Stop the lift." Justin said as he and the Doctor left the ground.

"Mister Reid, what just happened in there with you and that EBE is a scientific breakthrough. You must allow me to speak with you alone on the matter."

"I got news for you, Doctor, they are not staying down there. Whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of them. No more secrets. No more lies. I don't care about your research anymore. I've seen enough." Justin looked outwards and waved the whole group onward. They exchanged glances with one another and instantly proceeded.

Doctor Kleiner could barely be seen clenching his jaw in frustration through his helmet's obstructive faceplate as he lowered the lift to the ground. They stepped onâ€"it instantly jolted upwards once the last shoe left the ground.

After an upward journey of silence through darkness, the elevator finally stopped at the mine shaft that was all too familiar to Doctor Kleiner's guests. He easily parted the people in front of him and was the first to clear the lift pad. He turned to them. "This way." A few steps outward and he walked over to a doorway on the left side of the corridor, one of many that lined both sides of the mine shaft for the foreseeable distance. The survivors lingered close behind.

Chris scooted up close to Justin's side. "I thought you said we wouldn't be going through these doors, Doctor Kleiner. That they lead to the worst of imaginable places."

"I did say thatâ€"to keep you from thinking you could venture wherever you pleased. I would not intentionally lead you into harm's way. Follow."

The Doctor keyed in a sequence of characters into the nearby kiosk and a bright red light transitioned to green, the doorway sliding sideways into the bulwark. Kleiner immediately stepped through, bolstering the group's confidence in him and the journey ahead. Once in, Chris noted the air was right at room temperatureâ€"climate controlledâ€"much more bearable than the numbing cold of the mineshaft just outside. He looked back to see the door slide shut a second later. Looking ahead again, past wide shoulders, Chris could make out splotches of light streaming into both sides of the corridor up ahead in the distance.

It was steady thudding again, the Doctor's armored soles impacting the bedrock. "The level of intelligence these creatures have displayed during my time here is astonishing, but to have witnessed proof of psycho-telekinesis in a non-infected life form is something entirely new and groundbreaking. Do you understand what this means, Mr. Reid?"

"No idea, Doctor." Justin replied dryly.

"That EBE that you saw back there can communicate telepathically."

"So what's the punch line?"

"I've only seen it communicate with you."

Justin stopped dead in his tracks, followed by everyone else. The Doctor turned.

"Only me? _You've_ never heard it before?"

"No," the Doctor said, "I've only ever heard it through the audio setup in that room. Your experience down thereâ€¦it was purely telepathic. A one-way stream of consciousness. It spoke words only you could hear. You repeated them. And in the next moment, I heard the same words from the creature through the PA system in the room. You have a connection with that EBE."

Justin bowed his head to ground, slowly shaking it in disbelief. "I don't get it. Why me?"

"You said there were plants growing in the mine entrance. Did you come in direct contact with those as well?"

"You could definitely say that."

"Elaborate, please."

"I smoked some of it."

"Smoked, as in inhaled?"

"Just trying to get high." Justin said culpably.

The Doctor's eyes widened instantly. "Oh myâ€¦"

"What, Doctor?" Chris asked.

"Messenger Theory."

"And that isâ€¦?"

"Walk with me a little further." The Doctor wasted no time in proceeding further down the dark hall, his suit light casting a wide cone outwardsâ€¦showing the subtle contours of jagged rises and falls in the ground.

Chris saw the splotches of light growing larger and brighter as they progressed deeper in. Upon becoming flanked in luminosity, he saw that the light came from overhead fixtures from beyond glass portals on either side. It was what was housed inside that was the real sight.

The Doctor stopped. "Observation chambers for the combat forms." he said, gesturing outwards to either side of the hall.

Layla gasped, cupping her mouth. Joe rushed to her side an instant later, whispering something consoling into her ear.

There the group stood, just outside the windows to a scene purely horrid as Hell itself. Justin exuded no particular reaction much like the Doctor, having already seen worse just moments prior.

Chris nearly reeled back, glancing either way uneasily.

"Steady, lad." the Doctor said, sensing his fright.

Justin huffed. "Okay, Doctor. What are we looking at that we haven't seen before? Are the weapons you promised down this way or something?"

The Doctor smiled. "Just give it a moment." He walked right up to the glass, pulling a black grease pen out of a compartment in his armor. He reached up to the glass and wrote: $1 + 1 =$.

An instant later, as if about to attack, one of the monsters leapt towards the window pane. But it did not howl or throw a swipe of its deadly appendages or do anything the group of survivors had seen before. Instead, it merely used its host's lungs to huff hot breath onto the glass, a haze clinging there—forming around the Doctor's question. The next moment had everyone petrified in awe.

It raised one of its tentacles, normally meant for killing, and scribed "2" in the condensation.

Justin was utterly unfazed by the display of intelligence. "Doctor, where are the weapons we need?"

"Just a little more patience." the Doctor coaxed. "Watch."

The Doctor pressed a command on the keypad of the opposing observation room and a solid metal wall dropped in front of the glass, completely obstructing the view of the three humanoid combat forms inside. The Doctor then stepped up to the opposite side of the hall, to the glass he just wrote on and cleared the arithmetic away with a swipe of his gauntlet's rubberized underside. The combat form loitering a mere meter away stood rather tranquilly in wait, its hyphae undulating rather soothingly, intently studying the Doctor. He pulled out the grease pen one last time and wrote: $7^3 =$. He let the zombie get a good long look at the writing before he wiped it clean off the glass.

He then reached for the keypad for that chamber and sealed off its window pane as well, nothing but bare metal on display. Before stepping across the hall to the opposing keypad, he glanced at the group with a sly grin.

He keyed the metal drapes open.

There, already written on the glass amid fog was "343".

"Messenger Theory." the Doctor repeated.

"Telepathy," Ken said, "just like you mentioned."

"Yes. You see, space travel is long and arduous. Space is huge."

"—Get on with it." Justin said.

"This organism could be a seed-like culture of bacterium or viruses from very far away, even another galaxy, highly intelligent with its communication unhindered by distance."

"You're saying this species can communicate across the universe?" Bill asked. "What you propose goes against the laws of physics, doesn't it?"

"People thought the same exact thing about faster-than-light travel until Tobias Shaw and Wallace Fujikawa unveiled the first Translight

Engine. Is it really so hard to believe that a creature can communicate over vast distances without technology?"

"I would think so." Justin blurted out.

"Put it this way," the Doctor continued, "you've already seen what these creatures can do. They can rearrange their host's DNA as they see fit. They can change components of a body depending on what sort of external stimuli its environment enacts on it or what they ultimately wish to accomplish. People are always quick to uphold the belief that alien life is large, singular and complex. But what about the idea of a colonial-based life form?"

"You're asking us, Doctor?" Chris said.

"Many minds are better than one." he smiled.

"Just entertain the man." Justin moaned. "He's going to give us better weapons if we just play along."

The Doctor continued, "I know enough about the biology of these EBES to present a theory, coupled with what I've learned from your experiences, Justin."

"So, Messenger Theory." Justin said.

"Yes. And just bear with me. The makeup of these organisms seems to be that of a fungus. A parasitic fungus, because all lab analysis concludes that the root cells are heterotrophic, meaning they can't produce their own food. Therefore, they must hunt for organic materials instead. The specialized hyphae of the infection forms can penetrate host cells without necessarily killing them. This is where you would see human metamorphosis into one of these combat forms. But the parasite's life cycle, it seems, truly starts as a conidiospore. Spores such as these can travel upon virtually any medium. Wind currents, water, or any surface such as rock" Kleiner gestured outwards.

"These spores in particular, are highly resilient. The parasitic fungal spores, which we'll just call Super Cells for now, can reproduce asexually, allowing its propagation abilities to increase on orders of magnitude. The Super Cell exists on a cellular level but can converge with other spores when necessary to form larger multi-cellular structures, thus you get varieties such as an infection form, combat form and the dreaded pure form. And others still"

"The plant you inhaled is in fact not a plant, but a large cohesive colony of fungal spores that you introduced into your respiratory system. The Super Cell has spread to the cognitive centers of your brain, albeit on a much smaller scale and at a much slower rate than normal. I would consider you very lucky."

"Wouldn't the heat from the flame have killed them?"

"Not necessarily. Spores of any kind are very hard to eradicate" even temperatures as high as one-hundred degrees Centigrade aren't enough to ensure sterilization. Now, it is possible that you weakened the spores enough from the introduction of heat such that they're unable to carry out their task in full. For

if the Super Cell you contracted totally altered your mind and body as it normally does, you would not be human anymore. It may be that you've hindered their abilities and that the process of infection has slightly retarded, or even reached a static equilibrium."

"You're saying to me that it might be only a matter of time before I turn like any other?"

"Maybe, and maybe not. There's no telling how much damage you inflicted on the Super Cells before they entered your body."

Doctor Kleiner shook his head in amazement. "I finally realize now that life for the EBE community starts as the fungal spore, latches on to whatever it can and grows. It reproduces asexually, and with enough mass it can form growth pods. And so be it, that is precisely what occurred at the mine entrance! By the Leader's own design and by some turn of chance, the colony sent a part of itself journeying through the cracks and fissures of these mines to reach the surface...where it encountered other life to take a hold of."

"Forgive us if we aren't as amused as you are."

"The residual effect of you being able to receive telepathy from its central intelligence without consequence is something truly wonderful."

"You'd take that statement back if you were in my place."

"Possibly. It is a shame you must be going, nonetheless. You would be the ideal specimen for study."

"Doctor, I'm not a specimen. I'm a fucking human being trying to survive this outbreak!"

"Right. Well, let's get you armed and on your way."

"Wait," Bill pleaded, "I've heard it too, the voice. Justin, you're not the only one."

"Amazing." the Doctor said, now staring at Bill. "Two separate entities with identical occurrences."

Justin nodded at Bill. "I had the feeling all along." Justin said. He turned to Ken. "You too?"

"I didn't want to say anything. I thought I was going crazy or something. I guess that's what got Pete. The voice called him over to the vent and he surrendered to it. And it made him free the parasites from—oh God, Pete! I should've kept an eye on him that night. I—"

"There was nothing you could've done, Ken. That voice got a hold of him. It was going to find a way. It was going to get someone. That someone was Pete. Don't dwell on it, just be glad it wasn't you."

Ken nodded.

Justin turned. "Doctor?"

"Yes, follow me and we'll get you squared away, Mister Reid."

The Doctor proceeded further down the tunnel, and as one the survivors followed after. "Don't call me Mister Reid. I'm not your next-door neighbor. Call me Justin."

The trek through the tunnel was taking longer than Justin expected. He glanced over his shoulder, instep with the Doctor. Everyone looked down on spirits, but nevertheless determined to go the last mile. So rather than hang back with the group, Justin stepped up his pace to come side by side with the Doctor once again.

"You called that big EBE back in the vault a central intelligence."

"Yes, the community's leader. "

"I've never been able to say anything to _it. _Is the communication always one-way with that thing?"

"It would seem so from all observation. The entire EBE community is of the same, basic Super Cell. It would seem as though they are all linked by this Messenger type of communication ability. Apparently, it was determined by the colony as a whole that in some point in their history an evolution take place among its collective in order to overcome something in its environmentâ€"an enemy or natural event that required a being to be able to perform complex thought and movement. The fungal colony adapted to meet these needs and created a sentient being able to issue commands no matter what circumstances befell them."

"And how would it do that without interfacing with any technology?"

"My personal theory is organic oscillation."

"And what the Hell is that?"

"Oscillators are nothing new. They are the basis for any signal generation in radio transmissions. Oscillators occur naturally as crystals, usually quartz. If you can attain a rhythmic signal, which certain materials emit, you can produce communications. Simply find a way to transduce sound waves into an electrical signal, then modulate that signal onto a carrier wave and you've got a line of communication ready to transmit to anyone able to listen, provided the amplitude of that signal is powerful enough to go the required distance. My belief is that the central intelligence form is able to fabricate oscillators out of organic material and use them to create a telepathic event between it and any other sentient being. But infiltration of the host would be needed first in order toâ€"be on the same level, if you get my meaning. The spores traversed your blood stream into your brain, slightly altering your neural pathways and your brain chemistry, allowing reception of that connection."

"I'd say it was fascinating, Doctor, if not for the sickness I felt every time."

"That's just your body's immune system attacking your own cells."

Right now, it's trying to distinguish between what is you and the Super Cell, the virus. The problem is the virus is now a clone of your own cells. You may be stuck with this until I can synthesize a cure."

"Fuck me, right?"

"Ahem. I'm afraid so, yes."

"I seem to be fine as long as it's not talking to me. Can I survive this?"

"I would think so. As far as I've seen, the infection forms comprise the primary form of host assimilation. And the central intelligence form is there to issue commands to all it controls. You don't show signs of converting into a combat form, so I'd say you're on the safe side. But I'm afraid the nausea will still remain as long as you receive communications from the leader, and the leader will still talk as long as it's still alive."

"And you're going to keep it that way."

"Yes. It's no good to me dead right now. Keeping it alive also gives me the chance to create a cure to the victims. But I make no guarantees."

Justin didn't reply. He saw the end of the corridor in sight. Where it terminated, another large and cavernous chamber began.

"You should expect to hear more from this central intelligence form now that you've had a visual encounter, especially if you come into contact with any more of the EBES out there. And there's no telling how high they number now."

The Doctor cut the conversation short as he walked through the threshold and into the cave.

Stepping through, the group collectively looked to the left. The ceiling tapered down and met the far end, a silvery reflection of a grotto pooling still. Looking to the right, only one other path could be seen leading out and sloping upwards as it left the chamber—“not unlike the old mineshaft they originally ventured in from. Where it led to, no one could tell. Only darkness loomed, to where human depth perception lost all value. Inside the expanse they currently occupied was a ring of consoles in the center. Justin and the group followed the Doctor here.

"I don't get it." Justin said. "These are computer terminals. Where are the weapons?"

The Doctor hunched over and quickly keyed in a sequence of characters into one of the consoles and then briskly stood up. "Right here." he stated.

From out of the ground near one of the walls sprouted wide pillars of solid metal, nearly a meter in circumference. No one had even noticed them, their seamless integration with the bedrock surrounding them. They slowly rose without a sound until they measured roughly three meters tall, nearly impacting the ceiling as though they were structural braces. The Doctor led the group a short walk over to this

row of pillars, spaced evenly and in a perfectly straight line.

The closer they got, the brighter the glow became from light fixtures recessed inside the pillars. Strange contraptions looked as though they hovered inside their clear windows. "It looks like a missile launcher." Chris said. "The kind you carry on your shoulder."

"Close," the Doctor said, "but not quite."

Right at shoulder height, ironically, the Doctor reached forward and swiveled the glass door open and retrieved the prototype weapon from its mount—a three-phase electrical socket.

He cradled it in his upward-facing palms, a look of satisfaction brimming from beyond his bowed faceplate.

"This," he said executively, "is the Grindell-Galilean Nonlinear Rifle. A shoulder-fired, man-portable, high-powered, Carbon Dioxide Continuous Wave LASER. It has a tunable Etalon controlled by an exterior interface. Though, you'll probably just want to leave that at the highest power setting. Better to kill first and ask questions later when dealing with these organisms. Speaking of which—use it on the largest kinds, for the ammunition is a precious commodity that dwindles rapidly."

The Doctor bent forward and handed it off to Justin for him to inspect. "You get the largest and heaviest version with a larger battery. It will yield approximately five shots in total. However, there is one small caveat: the weapon discharges high volumes of its active fuel with each use, so you'll need to 'reload' after every five shots. I've given you three extra gas canisters to make do with, yielding fifteen shots all told." The Doctor slapped a gauntlet on the directed energy weapon for emphasis, "Use them wisely."

"Nice, Doctor." Justin looked into the magnified, top-mounted scope and peered inward. "But where's the crosshairs?"

"No need for a targeting reticule. When you pull the trigger, a seven-hundred nanometer pilot beam will provide all the aim you require, painting the target, if you will, in a pencil-fine red light. Be careful, though! The pilot beam is a parametric oscillation of the main beam, which reaches full charge capacity in only three seconds. Be sure of what you're aiming at before you let the weapon discharge."

"I can already tell I'm gonna like this."

"Now, give that one back to me," Kleiner instructed, "we have to let it charge a little while longer. Please, make yourself comfortable until it reaches full capacity."

"How much longer?"

"Give it—thirty minutes. That will ensure a fully-charged battery."

"Fine."

Justin claimed himself a spot at the far end of the cave away from

everyone else and the light, near the grotto that pooled silently in the darker recesses. He chucked pebbles into the grotto to pass the time, watching the way the ripples spread outwards like events in time. They slowly, leisurely undulated.

"Hey." he heard.

He looked up: standing over him was Layla, her smiling face casting a wave of serenity over him more so than the pool near his feet.

"Hey." he smiled. "Come sit."

She bent down and took a seat next to him, wincing as she tried to find as much comfort as the rocky ground would permit. Before either of them could enjoy one another's company, Kaiser Sergei strolled into view, the light from behind him cresting over his shoulders, face masked in darkness.

"What?" Justin asked.

"I see you're fraternizing with the enlisted."

"What is it you want, Kaiser?"

"Times are changing. Would you agree?"

Justin didn't answer.

"We've got what we need to eradicate any threat." Sergei continued. "We're only another day from the Pelican, at most. And soon we'll be on our way off this planet once parts arrive. And what then? Priorities will shift. They always do."

"Are you here for a reason, Kaiser? Or did you think I actually cared for small talk?"

"How about some straight talk?"

"How about we _don't _talk?"

"A lack of communication and pent up aggression is a recipe for disaster, you know." Kaiser Sergei looked to Layla, the smile on his face barely visible. "Does she know of your future plans? Of whatever it is you're going to do once we reach that underground hangar?"

Justin glanced over to her by his side. He hadn't told her, of course not. Not Layla. Sweet, innocent Layla. The look in her eyes confirmed she had no idea what was on Sergei's mind. And, how cunning the Kaiser really was. The king of the criminal underworld knew something was brewing for him. The look in his eye was enough to confirm it.

But she was _purely _innocent and could have no knowledge of it.

"Kaiser, whatever you're thinkingâ€¦whatever ideas you've got cooped up in thereâ€¦they're real. They're going to happen. Prepare for them, okay?"

"Well, that certainly answers everything." Sergei walked away.

"What was that all about?" Layla asked once he was out of earshot.

"I don't know, beats me. And I don't care either. I just care about you and me getting out of here and starting a new life. Fuck him. Fuck this whole place and all the scumbags in it."

"On the brighter side, you don't look so bad anymore." She reached out and caressed her palm softly along his jaw line. "Your face has all its color back."

"Thanks. I do feel a little better."

"The other girls and I back in the factory use to talk about you. We wondered if any of us would ever get the chance to meet you, to get to know you, especially me. I thought it was almost a miracle I ever found out your name."

"My friends usually do most of the talking."

"We used to point and laugh at you every day for a while just to get your attention, but you were invisible. We eventually gave up. I started to think the only man you were was just that shell." She looked into his eyes. "I wanted to know the man inside."

Justin furrowed his brow, searching for words. "I'm not so good at these kinds of things. It's just been so long, you know? What specifically did you want to know?"

"Silly," she laughed, "in time." She rested her head on his shoulder. "Let's start small. Where are you from?"

"Reach."

"Ah, military world. Guess just living there just winds up sucking you into the great UNSC."

"My father was a Marine. His father was a Marine. Family tradition."

"Is Reach anything like Earth?"

"I don't know. I've never seen Earth, but I heard it was decent. Maybe we'll live there. Get a house, get married. You know, start a family."

She smiled playfully. "Hey, I said we'd start off small."

Justin chuckled. "Maybe it's that I can't help myself when it comes to you."

"I wish the girls could see us now. They'd see that miracles are possible." Deep worry suddenly pronounced itself on Layla's face. "But they're probably all gone now, aren't they?"

"You never know," Justin said consolingly, "they could've escaped. They could be alright, somewhere. But I doubt we'll ever know."

"So what is the plan now?"

Justin sighed. "I have this crazy choice to make before I do anything. The Doctor told me so much back there."

"What sort of things?"

"The awful truth about this place. And just when I thought I had a good bead on things."

"Would you like to tell me?"

"I'm not even sure I should. It seems better just to carry on the vicious cycle of things and perpetuate a lie, if only for your benefit. No one should have to learn what I've learned. You know, even if we could leave this place and forget it all, everything we witnessed here, it's not gonna change what happened. And it would torment me for the rest of my days, I just know it."

Layla reached out and grabbed Justin's hand.

"Justin, from the moment I saw you, you know what I said to myself? I said, there goes a man of principle, a man who will stand by what's right. He'll shepherd the innocent, ward off the wicked, preserve the truth. You never proved me wrong. So just follow what's in your heart. Do what is right."

"The right thing is to escape, first and foremost. We're powerless as people if we don't."

"What's this you and Sergei keep saying about escape? You said it first on the way down here into the mines. Have you found a way off Traxus Nine?"

Justin scooted close to Layla. _So _close, he doubted even the most sophisticated listening devices could pick up what he was about to whisper. "What would you do if I said I did?"

She whispered back, "First, I would cry tears of joy. Then, I'd put the biggest smile on my face and shout joy to the world because you're taking me with you to Earth."

"And that's why I can't say any more."

"You're trying to keep it a secret."

"Yes. And now that you know, you can't tell _anyone._ Can you keep silent?"

"Of course. For you, I will."

"Good. Because if you don't, we'll never leave this place. Our days will be numbered like they are right now and we'll never see Earth together."

"My lips are sealed until that day, Justin. Now, does that Doctor know of it?"

"No, he would've brought that up during our little pow-wow if he did."

Or, Hell, maybe he does know but he just won't mention it aloud, like he knows there's still a chance for us to leave and he wouldn't do anything to jinx it." Justin looked toward the Doctor at the far end of the cave, scrutinizing displays and tending to his equipment, the scientist totally engrossed in his tasks. "I believe that he truly wants to do right by us, but there's no telling what he already knows. He's had his eye on us the whole time. He's wired into everything. So, we keep it under wraps regardless."

"That's that." she smiled.

"Bottom line," Justin said, his whisper barely audible, "we use the only means of escape before it's gone for good."

"No matter what choice you make in the end, Justin, I'm with you. I'm always with you."

"Nothing makes me happier than you saying that, Layla."

Layla hooked strands of her own hair over her ear, leaning even further into him as they overlooked the grotto at their side, the black ceiling barely visible in the silver, undulating portal.

Justin savored the moment as if it was forever. "Layla, you're my light. You know that? You are. You help me see what is right."

"It's easy to do when I'm with you." she said. "Now what's on the agenda _after_ escaping this place?"

Justin swung his gaze away from the water pooling below and straight into her eyes.

"Exposing it for what it really is."

"There!" the Doctor exclaimed. "Everyone, it is time."

Justin immediately pushed himself off the rocky floor and held out a hand to Layla, pulling her up the next instant. Together they walked over to the line of metal pillars towering over all else in the mineshaft. The Doctor was already there with Chris and Hendricksson. Everyone else gradually converged, the Kaiser wisely hanging a few paces back.

"Fully charged and ready to do some damage. You'll be the first ever to use it." the Doctor said with a boyish smile. "This weapon system was designed for use in large-scale, forward combat areas...by Spartans."

"Spartans?"

"Yes. There's quite a kick to this weapon. I'm assuming you know what I mean by that. So, when you fire it, make sure you have a firm handle on it." Kleiner nodded for emphasis.

Justin hesitated briefly before stepping up to one of the stout columns. The amber LED that pulsed for nearly thirty minutes now shone a solid green. He bent forward, unhinged a glass door and gingerly reached his hands inward. He grabbed the weapon with both hands on either end of it, plucking it off the three-phase socket,

letting the weight of it drag his shoulders just a little. "Solid." he remarked. "Just to hold this thingâ€¦"

"Makes you feel indestructible, doesn't it?" the Doctor nodded.

"Yeah."

"Well, that's a no-no. Put your faith in yourself, not in this weapon, because it will not last you forever. Remember what I said, now." Kleiner cautioned. "Three secondsâ€¦and BOOM. Make sure nothing is in the line of sight that you don't want vaporized."

"That sounds so awesome when you say shit like that, Doc. Just _let_ some bugger come my way. I'm praying they do."

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Alright, then. Let's get you back to your city. The sooner, the better. Do anything you can to fortify its defenses as quickly as you can. Even with this weapon, you must evade the EBes at all times. For their numbers will grow exponentiallyâ€¦"maybe they already have."

Justin glanced at Layla, then back to Kleiner. "I know."

"Follow me back to the main tunnel, that's as far as I can escort you. To get to the surface, you'll have to ascend the mine shaft alone."

It was a short walk for some through one of the many observation halls, but a long walk for others. The Doctor procedurally led the way. Justin chose to take up position at the group's six should anyone lag behind in fear. He'd be their pick-me-up if need be. To his content, no one straggled. Though, it couldn't have been easy on any of them. Justin half-expected a voice to tear through his thoughts again, but the Doctor courteously closed all the metal drapes to the rooms as they made their way back to the main shaft.

The Doctor waited outside the threshold, looking them all over as they emerged. It was then that Doctor Kleiner activated the overhead lights to full brightness for as far out as they'd go, shepherding a small portion of their retreat. There by his side was a robotic dolly, the solid rubber casters locked to prevent it from rolling anywhere. Its flat bed was laden with all variety of mil-spec weaponry, water and non-perishables.

Justin was last out. He glanced both ways. To the right: the elevator that led to the oddest and most frightening discovery of mankind, however exclusive it was. To the left: the upward slope that would lead them back to the world above.

"What time is it, Doctor?"

Kleiner's eyes swung downward as if trying to see his own chin. "It is oh-seven-hundred on the dot." he replied. He smiled for a moment at Justin. "I've learned a great deal with your help. Despite these circumstances, it has been a pleasure knowing you, Justin." The scientist regarded each survivor. "â€¦All of you. You have my best wishes. Unfortunate events have transpired and the future is uncertain, but if you work together to overcome this outbreak, you

may yet survive it. I have such high hopes for you all."

The others began plucking firearms from the dolly. Justin cast an uneasy glance at Kaiser Sergei as he lifted a fully-loaded shotgun for himself. "Thanks, Doctor." he nodded. "You've been a great help to us tooâ€|in more ways than one. It's a shame we'll never run into you again."

"Well, I may drop a line from time to time and check up on you, Justin."

"How long until your work is done?"

"That all depends on how fast I get it done. My best estimate, if progress remains linear, is a few months from now. You'll forgive me that I cannot legally give an exact timeframe." Kleiner shrugged with the powersuit's assistance.

"A few months and you're gone? You mean you won't stay for the scenery?"

"Yes." the Doctor chuckled brightly. His eyes suddenly widened. "There's several prospects abroad I'm considering."

"Can you tell me where? I mean, it's not like you'll disclose anything classified by narrowing it down to a whole _world."_

"There's one in the Sigma Octanus system, one at Herforst. But I think I've already made my decision. And no, it's not based solely on the money."

"Well, where?"

"The next assignment for me is Zagosa Prime. Big mission there."

Justin strode over to the pile of weapons and took a scoopful of ammunition for his shotgun, cartridges of triple-ought-six. "Zagosa Prime, huh? Never heard of it. Must be new."

"Fairly."

"Well, Doctor, this is it." Justin winked. "You take care of yourself, eh? Don't work too hard down there."

"It's never work when you enjoy what you're doing, Mister Reid."

Justin smirked. "TouchÃ©, Doctor."

As one, the group turned and began the long and grueling trek up the mineshaft on Justin's lead, the Doctor seeing them off until they were but shadows in the darkness.

The journey upward was long and bereft of incident. The group accomplished step after laborious step for nearly two hours, some of them showing signs of exhaustion. Such was an uphill battle. No word had been spoken, however much distance was accomplished thus far up. None of them truly felt conversation to be of real comfort, just an

opportunity to waste precious breath. Many things occupied each of their thoughts, though. As if on autopilot, they continued to march at a fifteen degree gradeâ€”something of a hardcore training regime be it appropriate or necessary on some other world, living some other life. But collectively, they had definitely slowed as a result of their immediate environment, no longer able to maintain the pace they had set out on. Justin picked up on this trend as he slowly and steadily pulled away from them, barely able to hear their footsteps against the rock anymore.

He stopped and glanced over his shoulder, realized they were too far behind and set the shoulder-fired LASER gently on the ground, eyes ever on the way ahead. The prototype, however priceless of an asset it was, had become burdensome over time. _Technology has its drawbacks, _he mused while at rest. He doubted he'd ever complain about its weight issue in the moment its use became mandatory. In fact, Justin could hardly wait to put the directed energy weapon through its paces.

"We'll take a break." Justin said as Chris approached his side.

Chris stopped there and hinged his NVGs over his forehead, setting his two submachine guns down on the bedrock next to the newly-acquired prototype. He let the darkness consume his vision, giving his strained eyes a rest from the harsh green pixelization that saturated his optic perception for the last two hours. He rubbed his brow, almost pressing it outwards with thumb and forefinger. "Damn," he said, "it's never fun going uphill."

Justin chuckled, though Chris didn't laugh with him, nor even cast a smile back. He instead reached for his brand-new canteen and poured half the water on his face, soon gulping the rest down.

"Does the meaning of the word _ration _elude you?" Justin asked, not expecting an answer. The ex-Captain glanced upwards once again, hoping, maybe there'd be at least a pinprick of light staring backâ€”something to encourage their labors. Even with the light-amplifying ability of the optics, there was nothing. Just the same green. He glanced back at everyone slowly approaching, "We'll rest here for fifteen minutes. I hope everyone's cool with that because we're on a timetable from here on out."

No complaints were voiced.

Chris seized an opportune moment and stepped over to Hendricksson, the marooned commander lost in space and time. Before Chris sparked conversation with the man, he quietly hoped there'd be some measure of peace to be found in his life. Joe had nothing much like him, he now realized. All hopes and dreams and familiarity of a real life were gone, stripped away by the infinite fugue of the cosmos. For what reason had the universe done this to people like them? There was no certainty in any guess. Maybe it was the design of pure cruelty from a higher being, a deeply malevolent force that slowly tortured rather than killed outright. Maybe these creatures were its divine manifestation. Or, perhaps it was the wrath of one such intelligent, all-knowing Master that the human race was far too atrocious unto itself to be shepherded through the random, chaotic events of time. Mankind wasn't deserving of redemption, all previous attempts failed. This was it. Hung out to dry.

He gathered that Bill himself might've agreed at this point. And he had experienced so much more than Chris.

But they survived thus far with merely each other. Chris would see it through and be there for them all, no matter what the outcome.

"Hey, Joe." he said, slowly taking a seat nearby.

"Hey. How you holding up, kid?"

"Okay. Long enough to make it back to the city again, I guess."

"You know, I never got the chance to tell youâ€¦you're a pretty good shot with a pistol."

"Yeah? Thanks, Joe."

"Where, no_, when_ did you learn to shoot like that?"

"Truthfully, I've never shot before. That was my first time."

"A natural. You should be in the armed forces or one of those sharp-shooters who gets paid to tour the worlds. You know, showing off and making easy money. Easy women too, if playin' the field's your thing."

"It's funny you say armed forces. About a year from now, I was set to join the Marine Corps."

"Shame, they could've used you. I knew a guy like you once." Joe's eyes glazed over and he momentarily glanced away. "His name was Jefferson. Private Jefferson. Everyone called him Ace back in his training days. Could shoot the dots off a pair of dice at a hundred yards out."

"What ever happened to him?"

"Screamer got him."

"I'm sorry."

Joe nodded.

Chris began to bite his nails. "Just one of them can't copy itself that fast, right? We'll be okay, won't we?"

Joe feigned a smile for Chris. "â€¦Sure."

15 minutes later, the group resumed the march uphill. It might've been better not to break at all, some would undoubtedly say. At least droning onâ€¦however slow it may've beenâ€¦their minds were wholly occupied with the events in Doctor Kleiner's domain. Now, it was as if a fresh slate had been carved into their consciousness, a soft reset. Now, most of their minds were strictly occupied on the pain their muscles had sustained in the journey up.

No one could truly tell how much distance they accomplished. Any athlete would surely approve of their endurance, dub them champions.

But, suddenly they were not alone. Something broke the monotony.

"Stop!" Joe screamed. Everyone halted.

"Why are we stopping?" Justin asked, slightly ahead of everyone else.

"Shut up and get behind me! _Everyone _get behind me!"

Chris and Bill readily complied, knowing full well it could be one of the machines Joe had feared. Gibson, Layla, Ken and Kaiser formed up after Justin.

"Single file!" Joe ordered.

They did as they were told, peering out, watching. Waiting.

"There!" Joe pointed dead ahead.

Everyone looked on over one another's shoulders, about ten meters up where the wall met the ground to the left. There, resting lifelessly against the bulwark was a rat.

"It's fuckin' vermin." Justin spat. "C'mon, let's keep moving. We don't have a lot of time."

"No." Joe said. "Wait. Don't move from behind me. I have a feeling." Joe brought the TAB strapped to his wrist to bear right in front of his heart. And not a second later, a Screamer emerged right next to the rodent.

Justin squinted harder at the ground and articulated a minute calibration input to the optic's single focusing aperture. The glint of a Screamer's metal body boldly announced its presence as flashlights struck its chassis. "And what the Hell is this?"

"That is an Autonomous Mobile Sword. A Screamer, Type One. It followed me here aboard my life boat. There's probably more of 'em."

The rat began to twitch violently much in the way a larger prey item would when in the clutches of an infection form. They all watched the display in front of them intently. The Screamer extended two appendages that grabbed a hold of it, reverse-burrowing as if to try and take it underground.

"Do we shoot it?"

"Normally, I would say yes, but it doesn't care about us right now. Let it go."

"It's just gonna be a problem later. That's what you're making it sound like." Justin took aim.

"Don't." Joe hissed. "It will only attract attention."

Justin smiled. "But I have this cool gun now."

"Better to be on the safe side, Justin. My TAB is the only thing keeping us alive right now. If we fire, they could learn from it. Let's not invite trouble, trust me."

"Okay, commander. If you say so."

A faint screeching was audible as the Sword pulled it completely under. The group panned their flashlights outward and saw what remained of the burrow trail it left behind in its wake, displacing the thin layer of dust above the rock and zooming all the way up to the surface of the mineshaft with improbable speed.

After enough walking, each individual's nerves had calmed since their introduction with the Screamer, an encounter Joe knew was both rare and appreciated. For nine times out of ten, it resulted in someone getting dismembered and bleeding out. That statistic also included those fatalities whose TABs malfunctioned or ran out of battery power. On Sirius 6B, it was radioactive fallout that was responsible for corroding the static recharge terminals on the TABs exterior, thus it couldn't maintain a charge. Joe was starting to worry if the excessive industrial fallout of Traxus IX would produce similar effects.

"Hey, Joe?"

He glanced down and it was Chris again, chumming along at his side near the front of the group.

"Hey, kid. What's up?"

"That ratâ€|they don't eat them, do they?"

"Well, I'm not sure really. They're scavengers and they learn. They use everything. Rotting meat gives off methane gas, gas is fuel...Hell, I don't know. Maybe eyeball jelly makes handy blade wax."

"So, what, are they machines? Or, are they like...alive? 'Cause, the part I still don't understand isâ€"

"â€"You can ask me all the questions you want, Chris. I don't have all the answers."

"Okay, just, where are they coming from?"

"Underground. They always come from underground. That's their main habitat."

"Even on Sirius 6B where you came from?"

"Yeah, at least as far as I've seen for the Type Ones anyway. The more advanced the model, the more varied their environments can be."

"So your side of the war on Sirius 6B created them. And you've never been down there?"

"_No. _No one's been down there since they pushed the first button and ran like Hell. After the day of their activation, it was all automated. They make themselves now."

"How?"

"No one knows."

"No one knows?"

Joe stopped.

Chris beamed up at him with confusion. "You mean they could be down there right now, breeding like rabbits, and no one knows."

"Chris, what am I speaking, Swahili? That's exactly what I mean."

"Shut up." Justin barked, briefly scowling at the two before looking ahead. "The surface is not far."

Joe looked on. "Where? I don't see any light."

"That's because I'm the one with the NVGs, now stop talking. Everyone."

"How much further?" Joe asked.

"Maybe a thousand meters." Chris said, stealing Justin's thunder.

"Alright," Reid said to everyone as the remainder of stragglers neared, "not much further. Prepare your weapons. We don't know what it's gonna be like out there."

The group took a moment where they were, once again activating their flashlights. The air around them was filled with the cacophony of rattles and clicks as people inspected their firearms and prepared all variety of ammunition, locking and loading in a beautiful, simple, mechanical symphony.

It steeled Justin for whatever was to come.

He surveyed them all. Nothing but hard eyes stared him right back. "Let's do this."

It wasn't until a hundred meters of the entrance that the light of day truly flooded in. The sun wasn't even visible, completely 90° due West of their Eastbound orientation. Nevertheless, Justin and everyone else paused there as the light all but burned their retinas. Slowly, the white haze subsided and the colorless plain of Traxus IX revealed in its muted absence.

And it was then, too, that a hum became audible. The source: an amalgamation of noises originating from many directions, of many living and non-living beings.

Even after all they'd witnessed, the group was awed once again by the sight before them. For the sheer amount of activity outside was unprecedented on this barren world.

Chaos reigned from one side to the other.

Denizens, both alive and of undead combat forms alike, scurried in all conceivable directions either escaping death or chasing after the living. Little parasites struggled to keep up and strike at any passerby unfortunate enough to stumble and fall. Amongst the never-ending supply of horror were a clutch of Screamers zigzagging through the dirt with speeds unfathomable. Their debilitating shrieks reverberated all across the plain and into the mineshaft. Unpredictably, one would launch out of the ground and saw off the limbs of anything that moved in mid-flight. Whatever still had a heartbeat was prime opportunity for the Swords. Already, pools of blood and puss gathered and gradually increased in size with every passing second, nearly connected with one another so as to appear a lake of horrors unquantifiable. And all around the periphery of this battle royale were other denizens sporting all manner of weaponry, leisurely picking off targets as if gathering for practiceâ€”Sergei's army. Machinegun fire streamed inward from all sides, pitting the ground with geysers of dirt. Looming in the backdrop was City 17, the mighty Eastern spire casting its towering, Sauronesque presence outward as plumes of smoke dotted various unknown locations nestled along the Easterly horizon.

"This is crazy." Layla whispered. "How are we going to make it across?"

"I'll tell you how." Justin said, unlimbering his LASER rifle.

Sergei took a step closer to Justin, standing merely a whisper's distance beyond his shoulder. "Part the sea, Moses."

33. Redemption and Perdition

****_Redemption and Perdition_****

Justin positioned the prototype weapon over his shoulder and peered through the integrated scope.

Everythingâ€”the stir-crazy combat forms searching for mutilation, the crawling infection forms looking for a host, the Autonomous Mobile Swords that appeared out of nowhere as their fear-inducing screams propagated the land, and a battalion-sized unit of Sergei's criminal army surrounding all the human refugees and rival gangs herded across the plainsâ€”was now reduced to a narrow tunnel view of just a few meandering targets from Justin's perspective. The scope now at 3x magnification made the chaotic panorama so much more negotiable this way.

Holding steady in a column along the right side of the display were a slew of digital captions, various telemetry readouts of the LASER's complex internal workings. The notifications were intuitive as they were informative, bolstering Justin's confidence even further. He gazed over the numbers and icons, grinning as he was shown in real-time the gas-feed pressureâ€”measured in psi (pounds per square inch), field strength of the N and P-type materialsâ€”measured in eV (electronvolts), the total gain of all solid-state amplifiersâ€”measured in dBGW (decibels referenced to 1 Gigawatt), percentage of battery lifeâ€”currently at 100, and the aggregate amount of destructive energy a single shot could produce at any given instant once it left the barrelâ€”measured in TJ/cu. ft. (Terajoules

per cubic foot). He wasn't keen on all the terminology, but everything looked good to go as far as he could gather, all values highlighted in a comforting green hue as he scrutinized the readings.

The weapon was extremely well-assembled. Justin simply knew it. The wielder wouldn't need to know the nominal values of directed energy refelectometers or understand the complexities of particle physics or possess in-depth knowledge of the eletromagnetic spectrum. The chassis of this LASER felt sure and tight against his shoulder, as if the entire unit was machined inside and out from a single chunk of metal.

Justin didn't force aim; he simply pointed the rifle straight ahead to clear a path and hopefully get everyone's attention. For an instant, a Screamer stole the show, lancing out of the ground in a blur of motion. At a mild arc, it sailed at high velocity towards a lone, unsuspecting human just as a combat form did as well. The sentient machine decapitated them both in one fell swoop, impacted the ground fifty meters later, and burrowed under again before the severed heads landed. Centered on the gory result, Justin knelt to the ground right where granite transitioned to clay and squeezed the trigger.

Reid expected something more overt. Currently, the weapon produced a whine that was barely audible, and the only thing visible out the business end of the LASER was the targeting beam the Doctor had once mentioned. Nevertheless, Justin waited faithfully. The ambient dust of Traxus IXâ€"now forcibly stirred by the chaos outsideâ€"aided the vector of non-lethal light. He held the trigger and leveled it to about chest height at the many targets criss-crossing in and out of view, waiting. For what seemed like an eternity, though, he had been squeezing the trigger, struggling to keep the aim steady, anticipating something marvelous.

It was taking too long, his coursing adrenaline amplifying the anticipation.

But deep within, the N and P-type materials already began to force-feed electrons and positrons together with the aid of a forward-biased battery, all components working in perfect sequence. Unbeknownst to him, the immense electromotive force resulting from such high current created a spectacular gathering of light and energy pooling in a junction directly in line with the weapon's focusing aperture. Still, just the dull whine, but instantly its pitch rose as well as the volume. It crescendoed into a strange, mighty roar as the entire body of the weapon kicked up and nearly broke free of Justin's grasp.

He barely got the chance to see what happened as a gout of chemical vapor expelled from the weapon's seams like a beast huffing in the fog of a cold day dawning. Justin remembered a fleeting red flash out the corner of his eye as the scope jerked away, but it all happened so fast that he couldn't be sure if the shot connected with a target.

Chris stood behind Justin, his eyes fixed on the aftermath, mouth slightly agape. "Oh my _God!" _he shouted.

Justin quickly hoisted the weapon again, getting it comfortable on

his shoulder as he retook aim. He peered into the scope in time to see a line of about twenty limp bodies so unfortunately in the beam's path all fall to the ground in unison, the first three of which simply appeared as billowing puffs of steam and green mist. Justin looked down at his weapon, awestruck. He looked up again into the field and outward from the beam's path: the entire arena of battle had been neatly bifurcated by this instantaneous lethality. An entire score of combatants had just been neutralized by a single shot.

A lull in the massive free-for-all then occurred, confusion brimming from all sides of the fight. Upon the instant it happened, Justin bolted from the cave entrance and into the open. "Move!" he ordered.

Everyone followed and soon caught up with him, surrounded him like a phalanx on wheels, weapons bristling outwards like government agents caught in a blitz.

But no one fired—"not one member of the criminal army, not one hapless victim caught in the fray, not one combat form, and not even a single Screamer could be heard below the ground. The entire expanse was silent and still except for Justin and those with him jogging through with a newfound look on all their faces, the bewildered look of triumph over insurmountable odds. Justin twirled 360° with impressive footwork, carefully but intently trotting through, flaunting the weapon's aperture around for all to see in a demoralizing show of force. He gave a menacing grin.

He then began pulsing the weapon's trigger rapidly. The thin, red line touched nearly everything as he swirled it about. His idle threats were recognized by all. Encompassing the fleeing group, their enemies remained petrified, uncanny how eerily silent one weapon made the entire plain.

Theoretically, Justin could end the entire battle right here and now. Pick off the most formidable targets while the others provided point defense for him. He especially had the freedom to do so if not for the complete shock and fear that reigned over the multitude of his enemies.

But he needed the remaining firepower to destroy the enemies lying in wait at the secret underground hangar, and the pure form barring their only means of escape. He wouldn't put those priorities at risk. He chose to let the effect of what just happened sink in rather than provoke a flare-up that would injure or kill someone, however advantaged he was.

But something grabbed a hold of Justin's temperament, something very formidable: himself. Every ounce of blood coursing through his adrenaline-doped veins ordered him to eliminate them all, the years of anguish and hate coming to a boil inside him now that he had all the power. He looked at the many shapes and figures surrounding him, all disfigured and grotesque, atrocious and vying for something horrid to transpire. His trigger finger stiffened in anticipation just waiting for someone or something to tempt him in annihilating them all. But then by pure luck something happened—

In an instant, in the midst of all his surmounting grief and agony and the vengeful spite whispering against his better judgement, he caught the sight of something pure and innocent: Chris—"the young

boy fleeing but glancing back at him.

Justin could have easily been mistaken with everything happening at once, but it seemed there was nothing but genuine concern in Chris' eyes.

Something about the boy reeled Justin away from everything surrounding him, everything he'd known.

The ex-Marine once again panned around the entire tundra littered with atrocities, some of them ducking or fleeing from his line of sight. He removed his forefinger and rested it on the trigger guard. "Straight into the city." Justin said as he maintained the cautious pace onward. "This is not our fight."

Within the passing of a few more seconds, the survivors increased the pace and left the immediate vicinity of the battle plain in a wake of awe and wonder. Justin took a glance over his shoulder, the group now running full speed for the admin courtyard and beyond. There at his side, Gibson somehow maintained the pace with the group as his body all but gave out on him. Justin peered through the 3x scope: far past Gibson's sagging outlines, he witnessed the surviving combat forms retrieve fallen weapons off the ground, swinging them erratically at first as if calibrating their host's extremities, now taking aim at any target of opportunity. Upon that instant, the symphony of gunfire and screams resumed and echoed off the looming courtyard buildings, off the cobblestone ground, echoing for miles in every direction. The horrid, thought-drowning wails of Screamers pierced their ears even from this far away as the machines resumed the hunt for all life in the endless plain. The multi-fronted battle far behind had resumed.

Justin turned away. "May you all burn in Hell."

* * *

><p>After a long and exhaustive sprint down the first leg of the main tunnel, Justin glanced rearward one last time upon nearing the level ground again. Darkness began to saturate. He stared for a moment up the slope. The light of day they left behind was painful to behold, his pupils contracting in adjustment. Some substance gradually filled his vision, colors filling the outlinesâ€"now sharpening in focus. Just a splotch of dreary grey was all that remained behind. Nothing pursued them. He exhaled and let his elevated heart rate and labored breathing finally take a toll.<p>

He unlimbered the LASER and let it hang loosely in his grasp, the weight of it starting to become apparent. He couldn't maintain a sprint like that again wielding this cumbersome device; pure adrenaline got him through that time. He glanced back once more just to be certain nothing was following. Indeed, none of his enemies were that stupid. Fortunately for them all, they could permit a relative amount of complacency and let their guard down now that the immediate threat was far behindâ€"and they'd keep moving forward to the end. It wasn't much further to the great escape Gibson and Justin had been planning and waiting for.

Justin resumed the last of his sprint, following the others further into the tunnel. As if hive-minded, all survivors activated their flashlights as they sped through the darkness and closer to the

underground gateway. The titanium mesh far ahead reflected some of the light in accordance with universal law, projecting checkered shadows on the roadway beyond. Gibson wasted no time in securing their passage despite being wholly exhausted from the run. He entered his credentials as his sweat dripped profusely on the keypad, and a moment later the same section of concrete wall that opened earlier revealed itselfâ€”first bearing its seams then instantly retracting into the flanking stone. Gibson once again attempted to lead them all to a proverbial promise land, red light revealing the way ahead.

* * *

><p>After the burdensome, single-file journey through the dimly-lit, catacomb-like corridors and the waiting for others to arrive in tedious, predictive intervals at the MAGLEV drop-off, Gibson hurriedly gathered all survivors in the maintenance bay, wasting very little time. First and foremost, he glanced at the ill-fated corridor where they had all met defeat at the hands of the monster waiting on the other side. The loss of life it was capable of producing was astounding, unsettling. Gibson still had the image of a decapitated man lingering in his mind.<p>

"Justin, how's that LASER doing?"

Justin inspected its exterior with due diligence, raising his brow, peering into the scope, mindful to point it in a non-occupied corner of the bay. One brief rundown of the various captions continually refreshing their data and Justin deftly set the weapon down at his side, nodding in reply.

"Okay." Gibson sighed. "I don't have a plan. Iâ€|suppose we don't really need one."

"It's not complicated." Justin replied, buttressing his right hand down the brawn of the prototype chassis. "Just go in, scope it out and handle business. I'll leave the technical stuff about the Pelican to you." Justin shifted his eyes and stole a glance at Sergei. "You'll know if there's any special procedure to run through."

"Actually, there is noâ€”"

"â€”so let's do this and be done with it." Justin cut in. "Sooner we get airborne, the better." He hoisted the weapon at shoulder height once more, gesturing for all to move towards the next and final corridor with his free hand. "Move out."

* * *

><p>Justin and Gibson formed the head of the group as they neared the end of the hall, the hatchway beckoning just aheadâ€”still shut. A deep-red glow covered all their faces, masking anyone's true intent.<p>

Gibson brought in close to Justin. "When?" he whispered.

"I don't know. We haven't had a lot of time to prepare for this. But it has to be unexpected or he'll suspect it coming. So I can't really say when. We'll just have to play it by ear."

Gibson nodded. "We'll finally get him, Justin." the admin's bubbly face expanded as its muscles contracted in an oily smile. "Just like old times."

"Keep quiet, they're right behind us."

* * *

><p>Justin spun around at the hatch and waited for the rest to near. As they began to gather, he retrieved from one of his pockets a small roll of self-vulcanizing tape that he'd lifted from one of the stockyard's many cages the last time he was there. He stretched out two lengths of the adhesive to about a half-meter each, tore them off and wrapped an assault rifle to the LASER, doubling his immediate combat effectiveness. One band adjoining the muzzles and another band mating the stocks, wrapped tight. He bonded them together like warrior brothers as he hovered over the deck in a half-crouch, uttering, "I hope everyone's ready."<p>

Gibson began loosening the rotary lock as best he could, his acrid sweat glands now on overdrive inside the cramped, watertight confines.

"Alright," Justin said, "hopefully this is the last time we'll do this." He patted the hybrid rifle in his hands. "I need everyone to stay extra sharp this time. Kill the little critters or at least keep them at bay. You cover for me and I'll wipe the floor with that big bastard in there. Does anyone need any time to themselves now before we do this?"

No answer.

"Okay then. I need two volunteers to go in first and make sure the entryway is clear of hostiles. Check the floor, check the walls, and check the ceiling in our immediate area."

Ken stepped forward, then Kaiser Sergei.

Justin held up a hand towards the Kaiser. "Notâ€|you."

"I'll take his place." Joe announced. "Don't want there to be any added tension now, do we?"

"Brave thing you're doing, guys. It's gonna secure our escape." Justin reached out with his free hand and briefly clenched both volunteers' shoulders.

Justin spun around. "Open?"

Gibson looked up from his efforts and frowned at Justin, instantly resuming his strenuous misgivings unto the torqued lock.

"Here," Justin said strolling up, "take the prototype for a second. Let me do that."

Gibson accepted and reared away, nearly dropping the weapon as he wiped his brow with a sleeve. Justin snapped the lock loose with one, swift twist. Within a few seconds, he had the dial freewheeling. The dog ears had swiveled completely away, though he didn't open it just yet.

Joe and Ken instantly stepped forward upon Gibson relinquishing his hold of the MA5B-LASER to Justin.

Ken inched closer and slowly nudged the door open with the muzzle of his firearm, glancing all about the ground outside the hatch. Joe stuck his head out as well, glancing high above at the support trusses bounding between the ceiling and walls like a digital sawtooth pulsetrain.

"Clear." Ken said.

"Clear." Joe echoed.

Justin proceeded forth, gently pushing the two brave volunteers aside and further into the bay. He lingered right outside the threshold, the remaining survivors filing out behind him, readying their weapons as they gauged their surroundings.

They each stole glances of their own at independent vectors, perhaps reluctant to move onward as the monstrous pure form and all its cohorts lingered clear on the other side of the expansive underground hangar. It was then that all survivors noticed an obtuse amount of infection forms occupying the far reaches as well, more than ever before.

Justin scowled at the sight. "There is no way in or out of this place except the hatchway, so how the fuck do they get in here?"

The answer would soon become apparent.

Towering twice as tall as its kin, the pure form exuded overt attentiveness and began closing its distance to the survivors at the same pace they had. It craned its 'neck' high, spewing nearly a dozen infection forms to the deck like a fountain of chunky sewage. Upon that instant, all other EBEs wheeled around and mirrored the colossal beast, inching forward with proportionate caution.

"Shoot itâ€|_now._" Gibson cried. "Do it! Before it comes any closer!"

Justin already had the eye cup of the scope situated over his brow, taking a knee. "I know." he replied coolly.

Justin depressed the triggerâ€"hopefully for the last timeâ€"and a pencil-fine red lance instantly materialized, placing a fine dot right in center mass of the pure form. Justin waited.

As the internal components warmed up and slowly worked up to a resonant crescendo, the monster dead ahead huffed one voluminous breath and let loose the most dreadful, horror-inducing howl anyone had ever heard. Anything metal was doused in beat-frequencies and droned with the roar's harmonics. Through the midst of a large mist-cloud expelled from its massive lungs, it charged.

"C'mon." Justin whispered. "Do your thing." He stole glances at each readout in his display while keeping the proper aim, hoping they'd retain the same values they had earlier when the weapon had all but quelled an entire battle outside.

Everything was in the green so far.

The monster now lumbering down on their position was currently in the state of the humanoid form—the one that withstood immense punishment. Its pounding footsteps could now be felt through the deck, gentle tremors reverberating into Justin's grounded knee. The monster only had about twenty steps to go when the miniscule targeting beam suddenly quadrupled in girth and stopped it in its tracks.

Justin swiveled the scope away from his right eye to assess the aftermath.

The pure form exceeding ten feet in height stood motionless where it was struck, teetering, on the verge of staggering backward. It doubled over and looked down upon its wound, a hole punched clean through its mid section about the diameter of a grapefruit. Stringy puss dripped down from the inside. It glanced up with sudden ferocity, its 'face' contorting with raw hatred. It charged.

Justin instantly squeezed the trigger again as everyone opened fire.

Justin saw with quite amazing acuity the various rounds impacting every square inch of the pure form's incredibly tough hide as he reacquired aim. The thin, red light was there—the only real assurance.

"Aim for the neck!" Chris screamed over all the gunfire. "Take off its head!"

Justin did as the boy said and reared upwards, a little too upwards, the pure form alarmingly close. Justin held his ground and faithfully tracked the monster until it was right on top of him.

The weapon bucked like an untamable stallion and light bright as a supernova discharged from the aperture. The LASER fired. A fleeting beam of ruby-red destruction sliced straight through the pure form's 'neck' and then terminated 500 meters distant into one of the steel support trusses, melting its longitudinal mount.

Its body crumpled at first, slowly losing its rigidity and no longer able to prop up its own mass. After a moment, it finally began leaning over for a glorious crash to the epoxy-resin deck. Justin rolled out of the way before the flaccid body smacked the hard ground. It rebounded upwards exactly once before coming to a rest.

The staccato rattles of firearms discharging heavily in the ambiance were all but drowned out of cognizance as Justin loomed over his fallen, alien enemy. For a moment, he studied its head lying a few feet away while all others fanned out and destroyed whatever lesser threats they could locate. Justin hoisted the LASER over his shoulder. "The bigger they are..."

"All combat forms neutralized." Joe declared.

Justin looked up from the pure form's bulk and scanned the periphery. "Confirmed." he replied.

"Damn, I'm out." Gibson cursed, throwing his spent weapon to the deck. "Doesn't matter now, does it?" he cried at the pure form's severed head.

"The others," Chris said after destroying two infection forms, "there were more of them. Where'd they go? Anybody see?"

"Probably crawled up to the ceiling while we were distracted." Justin replied. "You got most of them, so leave 'em be for now. I don't need you wandering off and getting into trouble. No one should be stationary!" Justin shouted. "We don't want them dropping in unannounced, so everyone keep a watch over your surroundings and stay in motion. A moving target is a hard target."

"Can we sit inside the Pelican?" Chris asked. "Like, in shifts?"

"Yes, but not too many people." Justin wheeled all around and spoke up, "If anyone gets tired, go in the hallway or in the Pelican, but don't crowd Ken or Gibson while they do pre-flight checks. Ken, do what it is you do. Get that bird warmed up for flight. Gibson, see if you can perform some deception operations on the aliens, confuse and deceive. I'm gonna stand guard on the entrance."

Justin turned and made for the hatchway, keen to get a look at the innards of the Pelican's rear bay as he walked off. A brief, sidelong glance was all he'd get.

In the middle running in a straight line, blocks of batteries spanned the length of the hold from the head of the fuselage to the tail, surrounding what could only be the core of the FTL drive. It was a massive conglomerate of hardware—almost too massive—standing high enough to nearly reach the ceiling. The drive and all its ancillary equipment claimed most of the occupancy and yielded barely enough leg room for passengers to sit comfortably on either side of it. Thick, stamped-steel flanges mated the contraption to the Titanium flooring. The Grade 12.9 fasteners easily anchored down its bulk to prevent it from moving anywhere, the raised bolt heads jutting high off the deck like railroad spikes. Justin had never seen a slipspace drive before. This was most certainly a scaled-down unit—only possessing enough quantum-manipulative capability to pass this amount of ship through the slipstream, diminutive in comparison to the mass of a cruiser or frigate. Elegant in its application, it was just the right amount of brute force for the job.

A familiar voice echoed throughout the cavernous bay with booming authority, just as it did in the factories, the stockyards, both cafeterias, both medical wings, the main courtyard, the entire city—

"_Attention, all aliens: please report to the admin district for your quarterly meeting. You've been very naughty and unruly, and this issue needs addressing. Arrive promptly within fifteen minutes. Refreshments and humans will be provided. Don't be late."_

Gibson hung the networked handset back on its receiver and proceeded back to the Pelican with a smug grin.

"Hey!" Sergei shouted. "What's all this inside the Pelican? Is that what I think it is?"

"Surprise, surprise." Justin responded.

Chris jogged up for a view inside as well, suddenly stopping in place. The sight inside the Pelican was one that evaded his understanding for a brief moment, then his eyes widened. "A slipspace drive." He turned to face Justin now walking away. "You were just playing games with us this whole time, you and Gibson."

Justin glanced over his shoulder at the kid and winked.

"Comes complete with a Class Five A.I. too." Gibson said. "For the jump calculations, among other things."

Then, as Justin walked off, a noticeable break in his stride occurred. Justin suddenly came to grips with something pressing. In the very near future, Sergei was needed dead. Just one last hurdle to overcome, morally defunct to some but just another necessary evil. He then looked back over his shoulder again and found Layla's eyes in the distance, his saving grace, his new reason for carrying on with escape.

She casually reloaded her shotgun, topping it off with two shells and racking the weapon smoothly as she strolled back to the vicinity of the Pelican. Something in the way she moved with that weapon in her grasp excited Justin. He couldn't quite explain it, himself. She smiled wide at Justin as she drew in, then she gestured about with her arms spread wide, the lengthy shotgun an extension of her body. "We got 'em good."

Justin nodded and returned the smile before proceeding onto his chosen place of duty, once again musing of a better life together in some other place.

"Look out behind you!" someone cried.

Everyone wheeled around, but it was Layla who now had to face a trio of infection forms descending from high above, already within striking distance the instant they impacted the floor with that disconcerting, wet _smack!_

One of them bounded forth and latched onto her shotgun before she could take aim. She backpedaled as fast as she could while several tentacles lashed outwards vying for her unprotected flesh, groping for an insertion point. "You're not taking me! You slimy fucks!"

She wrestled with the parasite, her body contorting for leverage much like the many appendages of the infection form now closing the distance as she desperately fought for precious life. Layla threw the shotgun forward with a thrust of her arms and it clattered to the deck along with the creature, but the other two parasites' endeavors fared fataly better.

"No!" Justin cried, running forth.

"Somebody save her!" Chris hollered.

Their fruitless cries echoed throughout the cavernous bay.

It was slow at first. The whole, brutal act was surreal as the other

survivors watched in awe.

The infection forms swarmed her writhing body.

The other humans ran a little closer, but this time more slowly as if knowing it was foolhardy to do so. Everyone except Justin.

They remained where they were and prayed for Layla as the parasites jockeyed with one another at being the first and only to claim her body and mind. Justin snatched a pistol from one of his pockets and took terribly careful aim. He squinted to block out some of the ambient light and focused as hard as he could. He fired off one bullet. It lodged right inside Layla's strained quadracep, killing the infection form clinging to it. Justin wasn't fast enough to sight up another target. One such parasite skittered around the left side of her rib cage and mounted her back while the other swarmed her vision. It slipped its toxin into her spine. Then, she turned to face the other survivors who were pleading for a miracle.

"Get away...from me!"

"No, I won't!" Justin cried, running toward her at full speed. Within seconds, he lost all forward momentum and halted as he suddenly accepted what was taking place. She was already changing, no longer the girl he'd known and loved. His abrupt stop came as though his legs suddenly rejected the brain's commands. He watched as she became tranquil as a beached starfish right before the parasite completely grappled her nervous system. It only took a few seconds, but to him it seemed like a lifetime as he witnessed the frightening detail of it all.

First, her body went rigid. Her entire skeletomuscular system was in shock, readjusting to a foreign master. Then, she convulsed where she stood, her nerves under forced calibration. The skin of her slender forearms cracked and split open, giving birth to a cluster of fresh tentacles ready for mutilation. Justin dropped to his knees.

No one could do anything as her body began to thrash wildly, nearly losing balance altogether. The monster beneath was starting to emerge.

Justin bent his face to the deck and cried heavy tears. "Why her?" He remained there, choosing not to witness the duration.

What was once Layla's fair, lovely face was now knotted up with nodules of puss and displaced facial bones, barely recognizable. The sickly green swelled up from underneath and spread over the entirety of her epidermis as she had finished the metamorphosis within seconds at the bidding of the parasite now reigning over her mind.

It looked up and glued its horrid, cloudy-eyed gaze upon each of them.

Hendrickssonâ€"now the closest human to itâ€"backpedaled slowly. "Justin, I think gotta take it out."

The weeping leader didn't respond. He heard nothing anymore but his own sobs drowning out the reality encompassing him.

"I'm gonna have no choice if it attacks." Joe warned again with a

reluctant levelheadedness.

The humanoid howled and raised its deadly forelimbs.

It was now a combat form.

It rushed forth with murderous intent.

The last sound it ever processed was the thunderous blast of a shotgun round ripping through its host's body.

* * *

><p>Everyone had congregated near the Pelican in Justin's absence, watching him pensively as he doubled himself over a rinse station near the diagnostic benches just outside the hatchway. It wasn't strange, his behavior, at least not by normal expectations. Many people might've acted out a considerable amount greater than Justin had: with ear-piercing screams and fits of crying that lasted hours, violence against inanimate objects or even people, firing all of one's ammunition until the clip ran dry, contemplating suicide. Justin did nothing of the sort. He was quiet as a pacified baby, save for the sobbing prior to sauntering over to the sink to wash away the grime built up on his swelling face.<p>

It was going on fifteen minutes of repeatedly cupping water in his hands, splashing his face in them, the tears perpetually flowing despite there being no sounds of sorrow in the air. How long had it been since the man actually cried? Not a single person in sight had the answer.

It came as a sudden shock to everyone upon him finally departing the sink, Justin gently twisting the valve shut. He didn't make eye contact with anyone upon making his way back to the middle of the bay, but his lucidity appeared to remain intactâ€”not the brain case some might have feared he'd become. Anyone could've been fooled by his present demeanor, for he carried on with the resolve they had come to know him for. With his step only slightly slower than usual, he scooped up his LASER rifle where he'd dropped it after vanquishing the pure form.

"How long until she's ready?" Justin leveled his bloodshot eyes at Gibson. "The Pelican."

Gibson's response was quick and blunt. "Thirty minutes, tops."

"Good. I'm gonna keep watch on the hatchway and cover our six. I should see no one standing still."

At that, everyone found something to do whether it was helping Gibson and Ken in the Pelican or checking on their weaponry, anything to stay occupied and alert on their surroundings. The threat of the infection forms lurking about was still real, and an attack on another misfortunate victim could easily come to pass again.

Justin spun around and walked off.

It was then that Chris took notice of a change in Justinâ€”not overt in the least. It in fact, it took the boy a second glance to notice

something was different about him. Chris tried to keep his concentration and cleared an aisle on the right-hand side of the FTL drive, but something _was _wrong. He dropped his belongings and strode to the Pelican's ramp, intently watching Justin walk away.

"Hey, Chris, thanks for your help clearing up the bay." he heard Ken say from the cockpit.

Chris forgot to reply, simply held his gaze upon Justin Reid departing the rest of them.

It was as if Justin had no destination in sight despite declaring his intents for the time being. Yes, he was off to keep a watchful eye, but that just might've been his only charge left in life if going by appearances alone, the way he carried himself. Fatigue could've been the culprit for such a somnolent posture Justin held as he shuffled his heavy feet over to the workshop area. But if Chris had learned anything about Justin during his time on Traxus IX, it was that Justinâ€"when it came to a missionâ€"was nought a slouch.

Finally, after what seemed like a journey, Justin settled into an area amidst the stacks of equipment, pacing to and fro just outside the hatchway. He placed the LASER rifle atop a waist-height section of wire shelving and folded his arms over his chest, staring at the entrance.

Unbeknownst to anyone, Justin had more to deal with than just guard duty.

_A mighty weapon you have,
>But it cannot destroy pain.
She lives her life with me now.

>Solitude is now your reign.
The season is much too cold.
>Join me and never grow old.
Defy the will of your
God._

Together, we'll clout the odds.

_Side by side, we'll march as one.
>We'll grow our world together,
Many corpses in one grave.
>So, why do the fearful run,
When life can last forever?
>No longer you'll be a slave,
When you join your voice with
mine._

Immune to the test of time.

Chris sauntered over to him.

Justin paid the boy a glance as he neared, but went back to watching the hatchway, no particular expression about him.

Chris kept his distance. "Hey."

"Hey."

Chris chose a spot underneath the small awning protruding over the workshop in the corner. He scrutinized about four-hundred square feet of ceiling over his head before letting down his guard and taking a seat on the epoxy-resin. "Whatchu up to?"

"You're looking at it." Justin maintained his watch on the open doorway and the corridor beyond.

"I'm really sorry about Layla. She was good people."

"I know."

After paying appropriately brief respects, Chris thought about leaving as his conversation was customarily of little impact to Justin. But something couldn't let him leave.

Justin may've been tough, a hard nut to crack, adamant in his determination even upon losing what he loved most, but Chris knew that anyone "no matter who they were or what they'd previously been through" would surely change after something that traumatic had transpired. Chris remained but withheld his judgment for the time being.

"What did you mean when you said that some thing convinced you to join the Corps? At the mouth of the cave, that's what you said. What did you mean by that?"

Justin's to-and-fro pace slowed. The ex-commander gazed low and searched for words among the texture of the floor, eyes half lost in a memory.

"There was a time in my life when I once loved unconditionally. I had a woman waiting for me at the end of every deployment. Those were the better times. I joined the United Earth Space Corps to end the fighting." Justin said almost righteously, a morsel of passion outshining. "I joined to put down the rebellion that was tearing apart the galaxy. There was justice in that. There was justice in love. And then when the Covenant showed up, justice became a lesser concern. The War we knew was forgotten. Fighting for justice turned into a fight for survival. And I started to accept that things inevitably change, because s_he changed. And then when I came here, justice disappeared entirely. Enough time spent in a place like this and you seem to forget that it slips away, everything you held on to "just like she did. Everything you had, everything that was familiar to you, it loses all meaning. Everything is grey, like the sky, just grey"

Chris couldn't think of anything to say. Even if there was something to say, he didn't know how to say it. Chris might've summoned some sort of response. Those appropriate, consoling words were right on the tip of his tongue. His thoughts, however, were ineffable this moment. Chris felt uneasiness in simply standing with no rejoinder to offer the conversation. What was worse: Justin never needed a friendship, never asked for one.

"What's the first thing you're gonna do when you leave here?" he asked intently. "Where you gonna go?"

"I got no plans for the future here or any place else."

"C'mon "you got a lot to look forward to, Justin."

"Income tax."

Chris laughed. "You still got that cynical humor about you. That's what I like. _That's_ the Justin I know. Can I bum a smoke?"

Justin lazily reached into his pocket much in the way Pete would, as if it was a chore to do so. He carelessly tossed the pack over to Chris, who took a single cigarette out for himself.

Chris visually paused, his body inanimate with trouble swelling his eyes. He thought it extremely odd just now that Justin furnished him an entire pack of cigarettes, with no strings attached, a quick handout without incident, free and clear. Cigarettes were a favored addiction, a treasured frivolity and a traded commodity on Traxus IX and were never in good supply among the group. Justin always handed over one, single, solitary smoke if anyone ever asked for oneâ€"never the whole pack. Odder still, Justin didn't even reach to take them back. Before Chris could ask why, the ex-Captain extended a flaming lighter. Chris leaned forward.

"You gonna look her up when you get back, Justin?" The boy sucked on the filter, pulling the flame inward with an audible crackle. Once lit, he reared back again.

Reid's thumb hovered over the flint wheel as he stared back at Chris. "What for?"

"You tell me." Chris said thrusting the pack of cigarettes back into Justin's space.

"Wellâ€¦what the Hell for? She couldn't take it and I don't blame her. She's probably married and moved on." Justin sparked up a smoke for himself, took in the first drag and winced. "â€¦And I'm still here." He exhaled slowly and then took another long, slow draw on the filter, the hollow of his cheeks dimpling inward. He stared blankly ahead for a moment.

Chris' incessant stare demanded eye contact. "Eh, but not for long, right? We're gonna leave, and then we'll be free. We can all start our lives over in a new world."

No response.

There was a brief, almost unnerving moment of silence as Chris continued to scrutinize Justin. Reid was thinking about something. That much, Chris knew. But of what? So deep in thought, Justin savored the nicotine for the moment and gingerly inhaled on the cigarette again, watching the smoke percolate toward the ceiling as he exhaled.

"Still think about her?" Chris asked.

"Used to be every minute, then once a day. About twice a year I get a kick in the chest. Funny thing is I can't remember what she looked like."

"Liar." Chris smiled.

"Gimme a break, it was ten years ago since I last saw her. No woman for ten years. I never thought I'd smell the skin of a lady again or feel the strands of a woman's hair in my fingertips."

"Until Layla."

The lighter fell from Justin's grasp, clattering to the ground near his boots. "Layla wasâ€"

"â€"the best thing that ever happened to you here, I know. But there's always love out there. Justin, you will find it. I know there's no replacing a girl like her, but there's always someone out there that can take away the pain. You can start over, but you have to be willing to wait. And you have to be strong. Promise me you'll be strong."

Justin grinned. "Always a catch. Kid, you've always been so keen to make that apparent, you know that?" Justin's eyes dulled over. "Seems that every time I get to liking someone, they ain't around very long."

Chris stood up. "I've noticed that when you dislike someone, they ain't around for very long either."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw what you did to Jaggo."

Justin smiled bitterly and tapped the cigarette's ashes to the ground. "You saw that, huh?"

"Yep."

"Well, Hell, I was hoping no one would ever find out what really happened back there, especially you. Guess sometimes you learn of life's ugly traits sooner than you'd like."

Chris scoffed. "Life's ugly traits? There's no such thing as that, Justin; it's the ugliness in people. And I never thought I'd see that in you." Chris looked around and sighed, "I know why you did what you did. No, really, I understand you perfectly. You thought it was the right thing to do. You'd be protecting us all. I know I'm young and people don't think much of me, but I do know that there were other ways to handle the Kaiser and his men. So I just want you to know that while we're still friends, our friendship has changed. Things are different between us nowâ€|and it can never be the same again."

"If ridding a threat to our survival means you think less of me, then so be it. I can live with that. I never held myself in high esteem anyway."

"Alright," Chris said resolutely, "just so you know."

"Fine by me." Justin said impassively.

"Oh, and while we're on the subject of shedding truth, I think Sergei deserves to know what happened to his friend."

"You think a man like that has friends?"

Chris glanced to the middle of the bay, then back at Justin. "What are we gonna do with Layla's body?"

"Burn it."

"You're not gonna bury her?"

"No, we don't bury those things. We burn them. She's not one of us anymore."

Chris was rather taken back by that statement, but it was correct: the cold, hard truth was that she was no longer human. "But we buried Pete."

Justin's eyes turned bright with rage. "I don't have to answer you. _Just_...go over to the Pelican and make yourself useful for a change."

Chris turned from Justin Reid and walked away.

* * *

><p>"And that's what really happened to Jaggo." Chris said.<p>

Sergei's eyes brimmed with confusion for a moment before finally accepting Chris' word. He nodded. "Well, I appreciate the honesty, kid. It won't ever be forgotten."

"Sure." Chris spun around and headed for the rear hold of the Pelican, anywhere just to avoid the wretched sight of Justin for the moment. Before he could accomplish even one step, two infection forms dropped to the ground right in front of him. Chris froze.

"Help! Someone!"

Chris backpedaled but tripped over his own footing, both him and the weapon in his hand crashing to the ground. Chris was unable to move fast enough to avoid his own demise as they darted forth to claim his body.

Chris pressed his eyes shut and prayed someone would shoot him before he could harm anyone.

But the only thing he registered in the next instant was a single gunshot, then a rush of air as something large swept over his body. He opened his eyes and saw Kaiser Sergei looming over him and pistol whipping the last remaining infection form, the creature bursting into an expanding ball of puss and fungal ribbons, his clothes showered in alien gore.

Sergei was nearly sprawled out over Chris and about to fall over himself, but slowly regained his balance, stowing his pistol back inside his thick jacket. "Kid, next time, move outta the way so I can get a clear shot. It almost got you."

Chris was once again at a loss for words as he stared upwards, spellbound at the spectacle of his unlikeliest of saviors, Kaiser Sergei.

The most notorious criminal in existence looked on the many faces that looked at him with nothing but sincere gratitude beaming from the majority of them. Sergei looked down again and held out a hand.

Chris diligently accepted, yanked up to standing height next to the towering man. "Actually, let's hope there _isn't _a next time."

"I don't know what to say." Chris said.

"I believe you're supposed to say thanks!" Bill shouted from the cover of the Pelican.

Chris gazed back into Sergei's empty eyes. "â€|Thanks."

Kaiser Sergei bent down, scooped up Chris' weapon, leaned forward and placed it back in his hand.

"Think nothing of it."

* * *

><p>Chris claimed a seat inside the Pelican's rear hold. The space was cramped, but that didn't matter. He still had his life, thanks to Kaiser Sergeiâ€"who was currently sitting under the Pelican's wingtip outside. Chris thought about joining the man, but chose not to for two reasons.<p>

-The danger was still prevalent outside and Chris was still too shaken to venture there, the fear still too near to him.

-It would certainly give off the wrong impression to those like Justin and Gibson. Chris chose to take a neutral stance for the time being, cautiously diplomatic and not taking any side. He began to think if he should've been that way from the start.

The boy checked himself for any scratches or nicks or anything the parasites may've inflicted on himâ€"nothing, just the now-dried puss that caked his jacket. He sighed in relief, checking his wiry nerves by kneading his hands. Bill strolled up the Pelican's ramp, Joe Hendricksson in tow.

"Hello, my son." Bill greeted, pulling up excess slack from his robe as he ascended the mild incline.

"Hey, you two."

Joe nodded, choosing silence for the moment.

Bill stood next to Chris, wincing as he squirmed between the hard, unforgiving battery blocks. "How are you?"

"A little tense, but good. Trying to come down off adrenaline. That infection form scared me nearly stiff."

"I noticed you with Justin earlier. How how do you think he is coping?"

"I tried to talk to him. Whole conversation backfired on me."

"What did you say? Is he willing to listen to you? Or still no?"

"Can't really remember what I said," Chris winced at the thought of Justin standing alone out there with his own thoughts, "but I'm not

sure if it did him more harm than good. He doesn't even seem like Justin to me anymore. I just don't know what to do. Maybe you do."

"Well, of course he's not himself, kid." Joe said. "He just lost someone special to him. Hell, I liked her too and I hardly knew 'er. I'd say it's perfectly normal to go bat shit crazy at a time like this. Just give him some space. That's all you can give a man."

"I don't know if that's the best thing to do right now, Joe...even if it is Justin we're talking about. He's the strongest, yes, we know that." Chris turned to Bill. "Can you go out there and make sure I didn't make his situation worse? He really needs a friend right now, Bill."

"Justin is his own man, Chris. He makes his own choices and has always readily stood accountable for them. Don't dwell on what is already behind you. Look ahead now, for everything is about to change again."

"What do you mean?"

Bill then took a seat. The others sat with him.

"Justin has to come to terms with certain things he always had trouble accepting."

"Like what?"

"We all arrived to this world at the same time. Me, Ken, Pete, Justin and his Marines. We shared the same experiences. We who survived waited nearly a decade for...something. Never sure what. We just knew somehow that anything other than what we knew here would be better. Turned out that the something was the decent folk stranded here. God has always tested us, tested Justin many times. When we were abandoned, when he found Layla. I'm sure he'd laugh at the notion, but he looked out for her nonetheless. Then you two came along, and it was once again our obligation to see you along. Always, the Lord's tested us. We've seen many others come and go, sometimes not in the way we would have liked. Understand that Justin's mind sees the world in black and white."

"So he commits and never changes? And that's why he can't move on? Is that what you mean?"

"No, that's not what I meant. What I meant is that it's difficult for him by his nature to understand anything in between, but I think after all his time spent in this world and what is about to happen, he will very soon understand redemption. So, while Justin guards himself, it doesn't mean he distrusts you."

"What's about to happen?"

"We'll need to let him decide that, as he has one last test to pass."

"Why is he like this to me?!" Chris shouted, stopping Bill. "Why can't I ever help?!"

Bill then paused while searching for the right words. "We all fell on

black days. Some more than others." Bill sighed, careening his sight to where Justin remained. "Don't feel that a burden should be placed upon you to intervene, Chris. You can't save him. He'll need to save himself this time. Excuse me, I must pray."

Bill Santhouse turned and walked away.

* * *

><p>Justin sparked his lighter and held it against the alcohol-doped wick of the Molotov Cocktail. He let the fabric douse itself in flame before bringing it closer to light the cigarette hanging from his puckered lips. He withdrew the flaming bottle, took a long, slow drag of the smoke and breathed deep. He gazed upon all those still in the bay.<p>

"The duty of a soldier is not just to execute the will of a people, it is also to protect the innocent. Each one of us is a soldier that carries out the will of our common pact, survival. But Layla was innocent and we failed to protect her. In the face of this failure, we must find a way to carry on and endure once again because the one lying before us in death was only once human. To be put to rest in earth is a universal dignity that shall not be denied of anyone. Stand here, and let what is about to happen serve as a reminder to that."

Justin chucked the glass bottle at the mangled, disfigured corpse lying inert before them. The body instantly turned aflame upon its shattering. The flickering yellow-orange demon tails blossomed higher and higher as the skin of the body cooked away. For five minutes they all watched, each individual alone with their laments and prayers. Everyone still in the bay had gathered closer to one another and watched as the last flames dancing over Layla's charred bones died out. Sergei chose to watch in solitude, the man of the hour still residing under the Pelican's wingtip some distance away. Motes of carbonized skeleton flakes lazily ascended in a spiral column above their heads, the necrotic flesh and tentacles of the parasite long melted away. One by one, survivors left Layla's funeral pyre and morbidly carried on with their escape preparations. Only Justin and Ken remained once the smoke disappeared moments later.

Justin turned away from the blackened patch before his feet.

* * *

><p>"Beautiful, ain't she?" Ken said.<p>

"Indeed."

They stood side by side, taking in the sight of the Pelican resting before them. Its angular, RAM-coated hull reflected light away.

Justin glanced upward.

The muted glow of days typical here streamed in along with a cool air as Gibson cleared the overhead launchbay doors from some unseen location. The ceiling split down the middle and the twin, massive concrete partitions receded into the bedrock that flanked them, City 17's courtyard pulling itself apart. A modicum of brass casings

spilled over along with a charred, twisted Mongoose chassis. In slow motion, the distant objects plummeted to the flooring below, the series of impacts just insignificant little ripples in the pond of time. Justin then swept his gaze across the composite panels riveted to the Pelican's hull, gave the bird a once over with his careful eye. He glanced over at Ken, who had been staring at him for what looked like a good while. The ex-aviator's gaze was anything but cool and focused. It was sweet sorrow, Justin gathered, this parting with the only existence they'd known for this long, harsh decade. In some ways, Justin may've felt dependent on this spoon-fed existence that a Traxus IX life was. Institutionalized—that's what lifelong prisoners and criminal psychologists would call it. Maybe they were.

But nothing could sway their decision to escape this ill-fated world.

"I was remembering that day at Reach." Justin said. "Pete got chased by that cloud of bees. Damn, that was hilarious. And that bar there. That bartender had that—"

"—had that monkey. Yeah, I remember."

"Yeah, the beach." Justin sighed contently, imagining the waves before him. "We sat there the whole damned day drinking beer looking out at those humpbacks blow."

"_You_ watched the whales, Justin. I was watching other things."

"True." Justin grinned toothily. "I think we should go back there. I'd like to see that again."

"What, girls' volleyball?"

"Yeah," Justin smirked, "why not?"

Soon, their laughter was just another instance claimed by another moment, an apathetic interval of time. Their smiles eventually faded as they spent however much time resting their gazes on their escape vessel, their sweet salvation. Ken looked back to Justin.

"There's something you need to know before we leave this place for good."

Justin stared at the acute angles making up the Pelican's contours. "I'm listening."

"It was ten years ago, the reason why we're all stuck here." Ken glanced about the deck in front of him uneasily. "—Major Renault wasn't really the one who ordered you to shoot that kid."

Justin turned and squared his shoulders at Ken. The sounds of fleeting memories rang loudly in his ears, the voices lost in the moments that now swarmed his vision. Ken blurred from sight as Justin immersed himself ten years in the past. "What do you mean?" his voice trailed off.

Justin remembered the convoy into the outskirts of the city. In plain sight, he could see the large, brass doorknob of the brothel they

were ordered to infiltrate as he dismounted the Warthog. His sergeant reduced the doorway into long, slender splinters with the aid of a battering ram and they charged in single file, taking up positions around the atrium. Sergei had the young boy in his grasp, pistol brandished at his head. Justin remembered hearing the radio, remembered the hesitation throbbing through his trigger finger the instant he received the order. Time seemed to slow down as he pictured that day.

The day he spent the last ten years trying to forget.

The day he received that heartless, fateful command from his superior officer. _Then t__ake the bystander out!_

The day he pulled the wrong trigger for the UNSC.

The day his entire squad was annihilated.

The day his chain of command abandoned him.

The day he lost everything.

The day his life sentence began on Traxus IX.

Ken came back into focus, his face now wracked with a disgraceful combination of remorse and fear. Fear resultant of the look in Justin's fiery eyes.

Justin's gaze bored thoughtfully into Ken's as everything regained focus.

"The order didn't come from the Major?" He immediately put two and two together and smiled bitterly. "Gibson."

Ken nodded. "Renault issued the order, but it was Gibson who wanted Sergei no matter what the cost. Renault didn't even question the administrator's request."

"Why did you pick today to tell me this?"

"You have a conscience to clear, I do too. There was no way I could leave with that on my chest. I had to come clean."

"Why didn't you come out with it earlier?"

"I would have, Justin, but I wanted you to live. The NMA did what they did and if you knew it was Gibson, you would've wanted revenge. You would have been killed like everyone else if you went ahead and took it. I kept it to myself all these years for you, to protect you."

Justin stared at Ken for a moment. "Ignorance is bliss, eh?"

Ken wasn't sure what was going on inside Justin's mind; there was nothing on his face.

Instantly, Justin spun on a heel and strode towards the exit. "Thanks." he called over his shoulder.

Ken, just like anyone, could rarely be sure if Justin was sincere in

what he said. Justin had been a professional soldier since his late teens with years of experience being able to control what was readable about him—but Ken knew that his friend of ten years, right then and there, showed perfect and sugarless gratitude in that moment.

Justin was almost out of sight when Ken shouted, "Where are you going?!"

Justin stopped just short of the entrance to the corridor and glanced back. "To get some advice from another friend!"

Justin disappeared beyond the hatch.

A ten-year weight lifted off Ken's shoulders. He flexed his slender forearms and looked back to the Pelican, his smile resurfacing again. "We're gonna need Carbon-Dioxide scrubbers and fuel cells!" Ken shouted at everyone. "Lots of 'em!"

* * *

><p>Justin strode through the corridor.<p>

Footsteps were the only sounds echoing through the lonely, dimly-lit path before him. He hurried his step to reach the other side, the hatchway there left partially open. A mere slice of light passed through and touched upon his face as he looked beyond the doorway. He stepped through the other side and looked around the bay. Bill lingered on the far side in solitude, sitting atop the raised loading ledge in front of the only open garage door, kicking his feet forward and back, his heels thudding gently against the face of the shelf.

Justin hung his head at the ground for most of the walk towards the priest, only intermittently establishing eye contact with the black satin-clad man of faith. Bill's full head of dark, wavy hair tinged a slight-grey under the ghostly-white glow from high above. Justin approached his side and merely stood for a moment, gathering thoughts. Another moment and he regarded Bill stoically, stating, "I know I'm not what you'd call a spiritual man, not in the least bit. I've never consulted you for advice. And I don't know—" "

"—"Justin, a friend can always help another friend. What is it that troubles you?"

"Ken told me everything." Justin pointed back toward the corridor.

"—"Ah, yes, I felt the time would soon arrive when you came to terms with this once and for all. You're conflicted within."

"But part of it doesn't make any sense."

Bill smiled wryly. "A lot of things don't make sense. Haven't made sense in many years. But I suspect you're beginning to understand why."

"Well, you're the only one I know that can make sense out of senseless things. He saved Chris, Bill. Why would he do that? He had

nothing to gain from it. Why?"

"Maybe it wasn't about personal gain this time."

"But is there anything else with him?"

"Maybe it was a genuine need to make amends. Maybe he always felt misunderstood."

"Bill," said Justin with a disparaging smirk, "I didn't come here for comic relief. The guy thinks he can saddle up at the last minute and everything's forgiven. I don't buy that. Do you buy that? And don't play the doe-eyed saint. This is real."

Bill endured Justin's banter and waited patiently for silence.

"â€|I'm _not_ a saint, but I know that no human being, when you understand them, is worthless. No one's life is nothing. Even the people that would once seem evil to you can have some generous act that redeems them from their sins. I'm telling you this as your friend."

Justin's smile disappeared. His gaze hung a moment as he struggled for words, his breath evading him while he searched.

"I know it's not at all logical to have faith, Bill, you just do it because it's all you have. But does Sergei saving Chris justify the life that was taken ten years ago? Does it all just balance out that way? I wouldn't think so. _No_. Guilt remains, Bill. It has to. It reminds us of who we are, what we've done. It soberes us, keeps us _human_."

"Yes, but who decides how long the torment of guilt perpetuates? Can you make that judgment?"

"â€|No."

"Do you think it has perpetuated long enough?"

"Who am I to think for others?"

"Exactly." Bill smiled and nodded at him. "Forgiveness is a hard pill to swallow."

"You're telling _me?_"

"â€|But I think the more prominent question you should be asking is if you've forgiven _yourself_, _Justin_."

Silence followed as Reid again struggled for some sense of normalcy, some semblance of the coping mechanism he'd known and reinforced for a decade.

"I know this is hard for you now, Justin. It's easier to continue moving in your same direction and to continue the hate, but what will it bring in the end? That is what you must ask yourself."

"I'll admit, I hardly know what's right anymore. Seems like my grasp keeps slipping a little each day, but the only thing I know for

certain is that I killed that kid, Bill. God, I was the most useful fucking idiot! I obeyed. I panicked and I obeyed. But none of it could have been possible unless Sergei put that boy in the line of fire, which puts me and Sergei on the same playing field. Both of us are...how do you say...damned?"

Bill cleared his throat and spoke very firmly. "You came here for my advice and now I'm going to give it. You still have good in you, but you have to give it a chance. You have to make amends. Especially now that you know the truth."

Justin hung his head. "It's like trying to stop a moving cargo freighter and turn it around in an instant."

"You assumed the weightiest burden and put this world on your shoulders, Justin, and you faltered. But we all falter. There were many forces at work that day and for many days preceding it. Terribly-evil minds with ambitions greater than you could imagine. They clouded the world in more ways than one, you see. And they pawned you. I didn't even see it myself until it was too late, so you were not the only one blindfolded. You've atoned, Justin. Anyone can see you've atoned. You need to look beyond yourself this once because a new path is unfolding. Take it, or leave it. God gave us free will so that we could spend a lifetime earning joy and peace. We have all the power in this world, so we must find it in ourselves to make the correct choices every chance we get."

Justin stood straighter. "Then the only choice I see here is the lesser of two evils."

Bill smiled. "Then you've found it. But do not think of the solution as the least of negative outcomes. Think of it as the most correct choice on your part."

"I know what to do now."

Bill nodded. "Go and make your peace."

Justin grinned darkly, his eyes narrowing as slits. "Well, I'd very much like to do it with you as my witness."

* * *

><p>Justin and Bill appeared into the hangar bay.<p>

In the distance, they both saw Ken jogging down the extended ramp of the dropship, a new bounce in his step and a bright, contagious smile outshining beneath his aviator's helmet. Bill glanced to the side and smiled at Justin, who grinned heartily back at him as they walked further in.

Gibson, Joe and Chris had gathered near the cowlings of the Pelican, Chris leaning up against it with surprising comfort, occasionally glancing upward through the cockpit windows.

Kaiser Sergei loitered in solitude much in the way Bill had earlier, seemingly deep in thought as he sat Indian style beneath the wingtip.

Ken jogged a few paces out into the open, stopped nearly dead-center

of the bay, placing his hands on his hips, shouting, "She's ready! All aboard!"

Strolling nonchalantly into view beyond the ailerons that Kaiser Sergei sat under, Joe Hendricksson emerged into Justin's view. Hendricksson gave a subtle nod, wiping his palm over a face full of stubble, casting his glance downward at the lord of Traxus IX's criminal kingdom.

Ken strolled back towards the rear bay of the bird. "Damn, I'd never thought I'd sit behind the controls of one of these ever again. Time to dip the pen in the company ink!" Before heading back into the Pelican, he witnessed the almost telepathic dialogue between the two military commanders, his reluctance to proceed forward with the obligatory deed now evident. Ken steeled himself before giving it all away and prepared to lend a helping hand nonetheless.

Justin had reached the shadow under the tail of the Pelican, the perfect position to strike from; Joe and Ken could rely a great deal on Justin's speed and strength to quickly help them finish the job. But Justin did nothing. It was going on half a minute that the three of them stood idle in a triangular formation—and half a minute of staring at Kaiser Sergei. And before Ken or Joe could work up the nerve to make the first move, the Kaiser leapt from his place and struck out at Bill.

With a speed thought incapable by all, Kaiser Sergei brandished his pistol before anyone could react to the situation. He gritted his teeth. "Everyone do as I say or the preacher gets a bullet."

"There's no need for this anymore!" Chris shouted, running out from behind the bow of the Pelican. "It's over, we've left Traxus Nine! C'mon, man, we're practically there. Remember what we talked about earlier? Live and let live. Please...we can still work this out. You haven't gone too far. Put down the gun."

Justin watched it all unfold, slowly making his way up the Pelican's ramp, nearly unseen in the background.

"Why should I, kid?"

"Because you're not all bad, you know that."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you saved me from those creatures once or twice."

"I saved my own ass, I'm sure you're familiar with the strategy."

"You helped us get through the mines. You helped us get away."

"Once those creatures were killed and I had this Pelican, I would've killed you."

"No. You know that's not true."

"Kid, you'd have to be rotten as Hell to lead the kind of people I

did. Justin and your so-called buds have been planning this for a while, I just beat 'em to the punch. They won't let this slide, either, so save the mediator role."

"But it's over. Look around. Our past is on this planet if we choose to leave it here, you said it yourself!"

Justin grasped the aft pillar in the Pelican's rear hold, hanging the majority of his body outwards. "Sergei, put the gun down and get on-board."

"What?" Gibson shouted. "Justin, wait, this isn't the way!"

"And why, Mister Gibson? Why is that?"

"Don't appease him. Not even to stall. Not even to save your friend. The man is venomous."

"And you?"

"Me?" Gibson asked incredulously. "What about me?"

"You've got some skeletons in the closet too." Justin stared squarely at him.

"The only thing I've ever been guilty of is bringing order to this city!"

A slight amount of color then began to surface on Gibson's face, his chest and shoulders swelling.

"And you're so good at doing it." Justin smiled darkly, his eyes narrowed again like twin razors cutting deeper. "You'll sacrifice any life to get it. And for what, a march of progress? Fucking...money?"

A moment passed.

"Reid," Gibson shuffled his weight, "it was just one_. Okay? A casualty of war. Kid was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Look, we had to go outside legal boundaries to bring down the criminal element back then, remember?"

"No, not really. Refresh my memory."

"A man like Sergeiâ€|you know he'd somehow slip through the cracks of due process and jurisdictional providence and any other bullshit that those liberal humanitarians would throw at us once we got him on trial."

"The mission was to arrest and detain until federal police could take custody. When did you take it upon yourself to modify our mission parameters?"

"Hey, I did no such thing! Only your commanding officer could have changed your mission."

"True, but he was working in your interests. Now, I will ask the question only once more. At what point did eliminating Sergei become the objective?"

"Justin, you of all people know Sergei's better off dead. You of all people know that our system of justice isn't capable enough these days"

"_Yes_, Mister Gibson, I do know that. And that's the reason you just lost your seat to him."

Gibson's eyes twitched wide with a mix of anger and fear. Fear"he glanced towards the corridor behind them. Time was running out for everyone while the scourge of alien infestation marched onward to anywhere it pleased. "Have you gone completely mad, Justin? What are you trying to accomplish here?!"

Justin answered the belligerent Gibson, but did so looking at Ken. "I'm doing what I should've done ages ago."

"I am the administrator! You can't do this to me! You will not do this to me!"

"Asshole, I've got the gun."

Gibson's lower lip quivered, then the eyes began to glaze over. "Reid, it was a sure-fire way to get a madman off the streets! I actually have to debate this with you while he's holding a gun to a preacher's head?! Just look at 'em, Reid. Always thinking, always conniving."

Justin's face was impassive, as usual.

Gibson suddenly molded his rage into a smooth, cautionary calmness, the tone of his voice level again. He stood straighter and pointed a finger outward. "Remember, he's the caged animal. He's planned this out. I'm not the real enemy here. Even if you think I am, killing me will only let you succeed in satisfying your own pent-up blood-lust"and you know it."

Justin waved Sergei onward with his pistol. "You comin' or not?"

Sergei glanced sidelong at the sniveling administrator with a derisive smile. "So long, Mister Mayor. Fine progress you've made here. Enjoy the rest of your incumbency."

The Kaiser hurriedly released the pistol previously pressed against Bill and jogged up the loading ramp, the bewildered priest instantly collecting himself and following without hesitation.

Justin regarded Gibson one last time as his hand hovered over the Pelican's hatch actuator. Chris, Hendricksson and Ken were the last to board.

"We're all animals, Gibson, even those things out there, but I see some of us are more human than others. Took me a while to figure that one out. And now I know why you've always been so afraid of everything. I guess now you can let that die as well."

"So, what, you gonna shoot me?" Gibson, the admin, chided. "Is this how it ends? Kill me here? Just like the killer you've always been?"

"Hell no. I don't need to kill you." Justin slammed the large push-button with a fist and the tail ramp began to close. "Something else designed just for that will take care of you soon enough. I've decided I'm not fit for killing anymore."

Gibson sighed heavily, then bowed his head toward the ground.

"Deep down," Justin said as the Pelican came to life, "you know you deserve this."

Within seconds, the thrusters spun up to full throttle for takeoff, drowning out Gibson's screams and leaving him to his fate.

* * *

><p>The occupants in the rear hold seated themselves and reached for their restraint harnesses, snapping all four straps into their cam locks with audible clicks as the hull vibrated and slowly levitated. Higher and higher it hovered until the cockpit windows Ken looked through were now level with the support trusses, about to crest over the courtyard grounds of City 17. He cued landing gear retraction. With one last glance about the factories and the mighty Eastern spire now growing smaller beneath him, Ken offered a punkish smile to the world. They rose above the eluvium plains for once in their tortured tour of duty, their lives seemingly purgatorial for the last time. Ken felt an overwhelming sense of closure: him and everyone else were finally in the clear.<p>

Were it so easy.

* * *

><p>Everyone inside the rear bay smiled ear to ear. The Pelican rumbled with life as it ascended.<p>

"And so ends the bloody business of the day." Sergei quipped. "Guess we won't be lending a hand to the less fortunate now." he grinned, tapping a knuckle against a bank of hybrid capacitor-batteries.

"The Doctor was going to unleash all those creatures on Traxus Nine eventually." Justin responded. "It's their ultimate end-experiment. We wouldn't have been able to make a difference."

Sergei's mouth dropped. "Talk about letting the fox guard the hen house. You know, Reid, this is the first casual conversation we've ever had."

Justin smiled like a friend would through the meshed network of batteries. "Don't get too used to it."

Sergei leaned back as tension left his restrained deltoid muscles.

"I have something to give you, Reid." Sergei grunted as he reached into a trouser pocket. Three metal ball-bearing chains dangled in his grasp, each of them linked to shiny dog tags. He tossed them high in the air over the energy containers. The tangled loops arced sharply downward into Justin's lap.

"From one warrior to another. I'm pretty sure I know who you are, now, and I believe these belonged to your NCOs. My hopes are that you won't be holding on to any vengeance after what's taken place here."

Justin splayed each of the ID chits out in his palm. They were unblemished and unbent, and he thought he detected a glint of polish recently applied. He read each name carefully and rubbed them gently with his thumb. "You were just defending yourself. The better man survived that day, is all."

"I'm sure they were fine boys with good families."

Justin pocketed the memorabilia and leaned his head back. Silence then permeated the vessel. For the occupants, it wasn't easily discernable how much altitude they'd attained. But instantly, light of the likes none of them had seen in ten years slammed into the Pelican like a quantum tsunami, flooding right through the cockpit windows.

The glow inside the ship was as bright as it was outside, as if the heavens occupied the vessel with them. The sight and the feeling of the radiance could be something truly divine, the forgotten warmth of it invigorating. Ken could be seen covering his face as he reached for the control to hover the Pelican. The pilot then activated 60% windscreen polarization and the light outside was easier to deal with.

"My God," the ex-aviator exclaimed, "I can't believe the sun is this bright!"

"Because we haven't seen it in so long." Justin said, unsnapping his harness. "Wait, Ken, don't go. Not yet. Keep her hovered. And open the hatch." Justin shot upward. "We've got all the time in the world. I need to see this."

Ken looked back through the partition and met Justin's eyes with a steadfast smile, reaching for the bay door override switch.

Cool air and healing sunlight streamed in.

Justin strode to the edge. For what seemed like the length of a blissful dream, they all stared into the sky as the Pelican held stationary merely a furlong above the cloud layer.

"Sorry for holding you at gunpoint, Bill." Sergei said.

The priest shrugged. "I'm sure many others would've done the same. You're forgiven."

"What about me?" Chris blurted. "Where's my sorry for holding me hostage in the factory?"

"I am...truly...sorry."

"Accepted."

Chris took in the sunlit expanse for a moment. A sudden impulse made him break free of his harness as well. He walked forth toward the open stern, to the boundary of the once-unattainable dream. He took a

spot behind Justin and stared out over the puffy squall lines of the forever, sunlit kingdom. He realized that Justin had turned around and was looking right at him.

"What?"

"This moment is yours, Chris." Justin glanced at Sergei, then back to the boy. "I tried to give you advice and show you the right way. I think sometimes I failed." Justin glanced out into the sky. "It's all because I lost the will to change. Then you came here, you kept reminding me of what it was I abandoned. And now I'm finally ready to leave this behind."

Chris was speechless as the light striking the back of Justin's shoulders haloed around his silhouette.

"Make no mistake, Chris, your life is about to change again. Make sure it's for the better." With an uncharacteristic air about him, Justin glanced over his shoulder again and overlooked the cloud layer reigning beneath his feet. No longer stone-faced, there he remained with a never-before-seen, all-knowing smile registered as if he'd suddenly figured out all the secrets of the universe. The VTOL thrusters fired downward and cavitated through the hull, and the vacuum draft of air swept in and out of the troop bay, drowning out any sound less audible than a gauss cannon on cyclic fire. Nevertheless, Chris listened intently to Justin, not missing a single word.

"You can spend your life doing good, or evil. It's your choice and no other's. We all make mistakes in this life, that's the way it is. But no matter what, hold onto what's right because we all get the chance to make amends. Don't ever turn your back on that chance, but never lose sight of all you stand for either. You've shown me a way to write over the past whether you know it or not, so thanks."

Chris felt a wholesome warmth he hadn't known before. "Justin, I'm sorry for all the bad things I said to you. I'll always have your back. I'll always be your friend."

"Alright, I guess we're ready to get moving." Ken shouted rearward. "Computer," he directed, "start slipspace jump calculations. I want to be en route as soon as we break atmosphere."

A synthesized, female voice returned, "_Cannot comply._"

"Um, what do you mean, _cannot comply_? State reason."

"_Stored atmosphere on-board is currently insufficient for the number of lifeforms present_."

"Bullshit." Ken winced. "I know there's enough. Execute another calculation and get me that jump solution. Highest priority."

"_Calculation re-run. Stored atmosphere on-board is currently insufficient for the number of lifeforms_"

"Okay, god damnit, you and me are gonna go by the numbers. Identify number of lifeforms on-board."

"_Seven lifeforms present."_

Ken glanced into the cargo bay and counted everyone. Including himself, they numbered only six.

"No, that's wrong. Run internal computational diagnostic and report results." Ken glanced rearward again. "I can't believe this shit. This lady might be defucktive."

"Let's hope not." Justin replied. "Could take us a very long time to run a jump solution manually."

Ken nodded, then placed his attention back to the console while Justin and the others listened in.

"Report, damnit!" Ken shouted.

"_Internal diagnostic results one-hundred percent. All systems fully operational." _Reported the artificial intelligence.

"Now," Ken said, "run another assessment on the atmosphere stored in the tanks, then make the slipspace jump solution. And don't fuck it up this time."

"_Cannot comply."_

Ken sighed explosively. "Well, what is it this time?!"

"_Stored atmosphere on-board is currently insufficient forâ€"_"_

"Fuck!"

Ken slammed a fist into a bare portion of the console and collected himself an instant later.

"Why is the atmosphere insufficient, computer?"

"_Stored atmosphere on-board is currently sufficient for only six lifeforms."_

Ken glanced to the rear again, shrugging at Justin. "Lady keeps saying there's seven of us. I'm lost."

Justin glanced thoughtfully ahead toward the cockpit. "Computer," Justin said, "...identify all lifeforms present."

"_Six humans and one unknown."_

At that, the sight of tentacles emerging through a wiring harness overhead stole the breath right out of Chris. His eyes shot wide.

He began to point but couldn't speak.

_Watch out! _might've spurred Justin. _Move! _would've worked.

But the infection form moved much faster than Chris could roll off even a single word. A second earlier and he might've reacted and pushed Justin out of the wayâ€"someone could kill it.

But it was destiny.

It crashed to the deck and grabbed a firm hold of Justin's right leg, instantly clambering up his body. Chris reached for his pistol on the nearby seat as all the others snapped free and sprang from theirs.

As it was for other victims they'd known, their efforts were of no consequence.

The hum of the Pelican's propulsion system left everyone's cognizance as the infection form mounted Justin's upper back, instantly raising a slimy, rigid appendage high in the air, the razor-sharp tip aimed right at his spinal cord. Justin already knew there was no escape for himself once he witnessed the terror swelling in the boy's eyes. He could feel the many legs racing upwards over his clothes. But he held his gaze upon Chris, nonetheless.

"I would've loved to see you graduate Basic Training."

The parasitic organism slashed its tentacle down.

It pierced the skin and found the sacral nerve with ease. In an instant, Justin's eyes paled over, the sickly-green welling up from behind them. Hope and the light in Justin's eyes a moment ago were now gone, his spirit gone.

There was no more pain.

There was no more pleasure.

There was no more power of will.

No more Justin.

It made Chris cry as he raised his pistol. Time and space slowed for everyone as Chris squeezed the trigger.

Prior to the monster before them gaining full use of the body it stole, the shot rang out and it folded. The legs sagged under its own weight.

What was once Justin lost balance and nearly crumpled. It staggered backward to the edge where a swift draft whisked him out of the rear hold and into the sky, where he floated tranquilly for merely a few seconds before plummeting to a desolate, clay grave awaiting far below.

Every occupant in the Pelican's bay leaned over the edge and somberly tracked Justin's descent for a fleeting moment until he fully disappeared behind a squall of fog. There they all remained for a time, words or thoughts escaped.

The tears silently rolled down Chris' face, and the clouds froze in his vision like tundra over the clay. In the pilot seat looking back, Ken couldn't stand to see it continue. He closed the rear hatch and tracked its movement through a camera feed, watching the heart-sinking look in the boy's eyes gradually lose substance over a panorama of wrought Titanium. Chris didn't budge after the last rays of the sun were choked off by the airtight seal.

Chris stood still until Bill placed an arm around his shoulder and nudged him further into the bay. "Sit with me, Chris."

The boy sat down and bent forward, his tear-filled gaze now frozen to the deck plates. He sobbed into the folds of his jacket. "It's not fair!" he trailed off.

"I know, Chris."

"I don't understand why!" he yelped in between the sobs.

"Maybe God needs Justin." Bill whispered. "Justin saw us through, saw it done. He's in his hands now."

Chris was unconsolable. His body was still trembling in Bill's embrace, the tears still gushing, unable to fully cope with the pain and agony of Justin's passing.

"'I have always fought against fortune, and beaten her.'" Sergei said, retaking his seat. "'Even in exile I played a kingly man, but now I yield and throw up my hand.'" He strapped in and tipped his head in Bill's direction.

Bill looked back down at Chris and squeezed his shoulder, and that's when his own tears began to flow.

"Not fair, Bill."

"I know."

* * *

><p>Chris looked to his left side and saw Bill leaning forward, empty-gazed and deep in thought. The boy caught a glint of light ricocheting off the golden crucifix dangling beneath the chain around his white-banded neck. "We have to go back for Justin. We have to properly lay him to rest."<p>

"Are you kidding?" Sergei shouted from across the bay. He had to project his voice over the wall of batteries and over the drone of the Pelican's powerplants thrumming into the hull. "We're not going back there, that place crawls! Besides, he wouldn't want to be buried. He'd want to be burned, just like her. And Gibson would surely shoot us down now that we've left that LASER behind, so I think I'm gonna have to pull rank on this one and say...no way in Hell are we going back there!"

Chris said no more and sank back in his seat. With a sudden burst of anger, he sat upright and threw a solid fist into the batteries before him. Bill regarded him delicately.

"Everyone, shut up!" Ken's voice crackled over the loudspeakers. "Reaching escape velocity is serious business and I can't concentrate!"

Chris craned his neck outwards, his right temple nearly pressed flat against a section of battery as he looked on at the cockpit. Ken was frantically actuating controls, his hands shuffling over the consoles like some frantic symphonic composer. Past the pilot's bustling form,

Chris realized the light that razored through the windows earlier was slowly dying out, deep blue creeping in, slowly fading to black. The longer he looked on, pinpricks of light slowly materialized. Again and again, they died out, and then came back again, wavering with the last, highest reaches of the planet's haze. And then all at once, a full field of starry night dominated the cockpit view.

Ken himself picked his head up and paused, perhaps marveling at the sight of it all, the wonder of space.

Everyone rose a few centimeters before their restraint harnesses caught them.

"Well," Ken came again, "We ain't dead yet so that must mean the seals are still good. We'll be jumping very soon. Let's hope Gibson's money went a long way when he modded this thing." Ken released the mic. "â€|'cause everyone knows you get what you pay for." he mumbled.

Chris tightened the four straps holding him in his seat. "What's it gonna be like?" he shouted at the cockpit.

"Should be just like any other uneventful jump, but it could be as much as a week to the nearest starport, so get as comfy as you all can! And Sergei, please don't fart."

With that, Chris felt a warmth emanating from not too far in front of him. Curious, he placed one of his bare palms over a section of battery and recoiled. The heat had built up quickly. Any other scenario and this environment would very well prove to be unacceptable over enough time. Even if jump-capable Pelicans proved to be of some use in the real world, surely this dubious sight of engineering on display was the shining example of how not to do it. Pelicans were never designed for long durations of space flight either, and the cramped conditions made it even more discomforting, the heap of batteries quite capable of inducing claustrophobia in even the steadiest of men. But at least the arrangement would keep them all warm during the long, cold journey.

The hum of the engines and the ancillary systems supporting them suddenly went silent, the Pelican now drifting. Chris expected some negative inertia. He expected he'd lurch towards his left and shoulder-butt Bill from precipitous loss of momentum, but there was nothing to slow them down; the only medium they traversed was just cold, empty vacuum. They were by all accounts free.

Chris sighed deep as he never had before.

And that's when Ken uttered, "Oh my God, what is this?"

All eyes and ears in the bay perked up, jockeying for a good view on the cockpit.

The view outside the canopy was something completely unexpected: not empty. Not just celestial bodies glimmering in the far beyond, but more of the all-too-familiar mayhem they had tried to put behind them.

"Well now, there's something no one's seen before." Sergei remarked dryly. "Humans killing humans, imagine that."

Spaceborne fighter vessels streaked through the void with tight, erratic maneuvers, all of them engaged in dogfights with countless others—either in pursuit or attempting to shake off their attackers. It wasn't until one such vessel exploded into a ball of gas and glittering metal shards that everyone started to feel fear again. There was a brief, elastic explosion that expanded and contracted once all the oxygen onboard the fighter craft was consumed. Ken remained perfectly still in the pilot's seat.

"Let's go!" Chris shouted. "What are you waiting for? Get us out of here!"

"No!" Ken corrected. "We stay _quiet_. It'll take too long for the computer to get the jump coordinates right, and if I keep the systems running we'll be found."

"Can't you just point the damn thing in the right direction?"

"Wanna end your jump inside a supernova? Alright then, shut up and let me do the work here! All subspace systems are powered off and they're gonna stay that way until all this is over with. It's the only reason we're not dead yet." Ken reached for a non-OEM control and instantly the heat in the rear bay dissipated entirely, swallowed whole by the all-pervading cold in the metal hull. "We're going dark." Ken announced. "No one activate any electronics you might have if you wanna live through this shooting gallery."

All survivors stared out the canopy, taking in all the many pockets of skirmishes taking place. Various craft were dispatched like clockwork either by forward-mounted guns or heat-seeking missiles, a few stray rounds whizzing closely by the Pelican. A myriad of silent explosions dotted the shadowy vista as kill after kill was scored. Poised in space beyond it all were a trio of heavy cruisers, watching it all like wiser scavengers.

Over time, the panorama was less and less active, the two sides of the battle increasingly distinguishable as victorious fighter craft acquired new targets alongside their wingmen, ganging up on the last remaining squadrons of their enemies—who were inevitably doomed by overwhelming numbers. Finally, after fifteen minutes of quiet observation on the edge of their seats, the survivors witnessed the last remaining craft making for escape vectors. The losing side was grossly outnumbered and they knew it, whether by electronic sensory or just gut instinct. They executed a maximum burn hoping to evade their numerous enemy's long-range weaponry. But expectedly, they were vanquished by their superior opponents in the moments that followed.

"One helluva party." Ken whispered absentmindedly. "Well, now's our time to jet."

Ken watched the triumphant fighter wing dwindle in size as they sped away at zero by one-eighty, vectoring into the periphery of the cockpit's view and completely disappearing thereafter. All on display now were three cruisers floating serenely, each one appearing no bigger than a river salmon amid the overwhelming jury of a billion stars in view. It was then that Ken wondered why the fighter craft did not proceed back to where they presumably originated from—the cruisers in the distance. The distance—|

Ken cocked his head to the side and realized the cruisers were now noticeably closer to them than before.

He realized his presence was overstayed. He reached for the rocker switch responsible for warming up the systems and flipped it to ON.

Nothing.

Ken noticed the panel illumination was off, though he didn't remember deactivating it. He furrowed his brow when he found the switch was indeed already on just like he remembered it to be.

A short-circuit? It was entirely possible; this bird was old and probably hadn't received the life cycle sustainment it required. The serial tag on the console specified a final assembly date of **14FEB2525**.

He hoped the internal contacts just had a bit of corrosion on them. But with so much seat time in Pelicans during his days as a flight officer, he had come to know these airframes inside and out. Any circuit that wasn't already upgraded to photonic chips during the UNSC's Equipment Standardization & Modernization Mandate of 2530 would incorporate Gold or Platinum-plated electrical contacts and PCBs that underwent polymer lamination, rendering them virtually corrosion-proof. He didn't rule out the possibility, though. He tried again and flicked the switch off, then on again.

Still nothing. "Okay, this isn't funny." he said in the silence.

"What is it?" Chris asked.

Ken frowned, "Nothing's responding." He then reached for a different set of controls, flipping random switches into any allowable position, rewarded with no output every time. "Okay, now you can start worrying."

"Those ships," Chris said, "they're getting closer."

Ken glanced up and then back down, pouring all concentration into his futile attempts. "I know."

"What's wrong with the ship?"

"They must've zapped us with a strong EMP. We're stone cold dead in the water, fellas."

"They're not gonna kill us, so don't worry." Sergei said. "They could've destroyed us long ago with ranged weapons. They want to interrogate us, that's all."

"Who the fuck are they?" Ken asked, his eyes now fixed on the approaching mammoths.

"They don't look military." Sergei remarked thoughtfully from his seat. "Definitely civilian, maybe rebels or something, maybe Friedens. I wouldn't put it past them to use armed force against THI's defenses and start plundering. I just never thought the

bastards had the resources to do it. Maybe I was wrong."

"You think it's rebel pirates? How could they amass a fighter wing that large? _And _three heavy cruisers?"

"I said was just guessing." Sergei shot back.

Chris loosened up his straps, leaned farther out for a better view. Three large ships on imminent approach were anything but good news. "God, I wish Justin was here."

"Wishful thinking ain't gonna get us outta this pickle." Sergei grunted, inspecting his pistol.

Chris nodded solemnly. "What are we supposed to do now? If we get boarded, surely our firepower will be no match against theirs."

"Don't you see, Chris?" Sergei snapped out of his restraint harness and floated past the others towards the cockpit partition, intently gazing out the windscreen. The lead cruiser now a mere two kilometers distant was spinning about its y-axis, revealing the lateral line. More and more of its bloated mid-section showed as it slowly but surely approached. The port side soon came into full view, and then it stopped rotating. It maintained that orientation as a wide swath of light materialized amidships, growing taller and brighter, a massive air lock opening. "We're not getting boarded. We're being swallowed up."

34. In The Belly of Another Beast

****_In The Belly of Another Beast_****

The cruiser was surely approaching.

Ken forced his gaze away from the windscreen, a difficult action now that his Pelican was on a confirmed collision course with an object possessing hundreds of times more mass.

The ex-pilot swept his eyes over the cockpit's wide console hoping to scavenge any morsel of information that could prove useful in the future, but all the electronics were fried—a very strong EMP emitted from the gargantuan trio, he suspected. The inky-black void itself was getting eaten up from the inside out as the lead cruiser swelled up like a balloon. A strange object attached to the belly of the ship was now barely visible, so insignificant to the naked eye yet it warranted observation. It was like a dangling chandelier, a stack of rings that he mistook for a giant antenna at first. He would've spent a unit of time guessing what it was, but he and everyone else were speeding towards the looming vessel in perfect silence, powerless to stop it.

Chris felt resigned to fate once more. The boy crossed his arms and clutched his shoulders, then started to shiver. "I had no idea it was this cold in space."

"Try not to breathe too hard." Ken announced over his shoulder. "And try to keep conversation at a minimum. That goes for everyone. There'll be nothing in here but pure Carbon-Dioxide in a matter of

minutes."

Ken once again looked ahead just as all the stars were blotted out. The cruiser's outer paneling grew larger by the second, minute details now visible. Microthrusters and solid waste spigot tubes bristled outwards every few meters and photovoltaic arrays pockmarked the hull, glistening with a blackness as deep as space itself.

Hendricksson intently gazed upon the mammoth cruiser's skin now fully encompassing the cockpit's diminutive field of view, appearing bloated and blimpish. Rivets could now be seen. "Hey...Ken...what's our velocity?" he asked, hesitant to hear the answer.

"Hell if I know!" The pilot vented in frustration. "Everything inside the forward radome is burnt to shit and all the instruments are _useless_ to me."

"I hope _they_ _know_ what our speed is, because we're about to spear them right in the gut."

"Of course they know." Sergei said, now sitting cross-legged. Joe glanced his way, then back out the distant windscreen.

"No, Sergei. No, we're coming in too hot. Dear God, I think we're speeding up."

"He's right!" Chris shouted.

"Calm down." Ken urged sternly.

"_Well_, how are we supposed to slow down without any propulsion?" Joe screamed.

Sergei chuckled and flicked a piece of lint off his knee. "Guess they'll have to find a way for us."

The cruiser's internal illumination flooding out its airlock was painful to look at. Chris squinted, then realized the light was still too bright for his vision to process anything. He had no choice but to look rearward, further into the Pelican's hold. His eyes took a moment to adjust, then a large, yellow-white rectangle lingered everywhere he looked. As soon as the rods and cones in his eyes chemically filtered out the intense overexposure, he caught the sight of something strange all around him. Every unused restraining strap in the bay was levitated, the metal buckles on either side of the aisle angled straight towards the cockpit. It could only mean one thing: the Pelican and everything inside it was being obstinately dragged forward by a magnetic force of unfathomable strength. "The ship isn't coming toward us. We're being pulled in."

Kaiser Sergei let his arm hang free and float upwards. He watched it get tugged along by the wristwatch as if an invisible spirit guided. All eyes regarded the spectacle for a moment then went back to the front. Each survivor tried as best they could to study their inevitable destination as they drew nearer to it, Ken shifting in his seat with the only vantage point worthy of such an attempt.

The bay's inlet was now just a few hundred meters in front of the Pelican's nose cone.

The view of the airlock's interior was improving proportionally to the rapidly dwindling distance to it. The bay certainly looked large enough to accommodate a D77-TC dropship with room to spare, but Ken agreed with Joe: their approach was too fast. Ken identified many objects around the Pelican that he could reference, and indeed their current speed had to be at least one-hundred knots and holding. The cruiser itself was larger than life, and the dropship was at the cusp of entering the massive fissure, a wonder to Ken that they remained perfectly on courseâ€”a straight vector to the innards of the enveloping hulk. He tightened his straps as hard as he could and braced himself with outstretched arms. He referenced the gauges one last timeâ€”nothing. The Pelican's prow passed through the threshold.

Then to his glance, Ken's attention was stolen by the wide console of controls and indicators before him. Stunned, he saw the analog compass and a few other ferrometric gauges going erratic, their needles deflecting from one extreme to the other. The majority of them shouldn't have worked at all. Unbeknownst to him during this moment of inevitable peril, the Pelican's hull was passing through oscillating poles of magnetism.

He looked up through the windscreen again and winced at the sight of a load-bearing bulkhead rapidly closing the distance, and the Pelican wasn't slowing down.

"Hang on!"

The Pelican shuddered fiercelyâ€”but with some distance before the actual collision. Before Ken could understand why, his vessel immediately slowed to a halt well before the impact should've happened. His breath faltered as he flew forward a few millimeters, the harness absorbing all of his momentum.

Their velocity relative to the cruiser's was now at zero and perfectly stable.

Moments passed as Ken swayed in and out of consciousness, his head jarred from the near-instantaneous deceleration. No other vessel occupied the spacious bay. All was quiet. Another moment and his vision was no longer a blur. He blinked a few times to clear the haze away and looked around, trying to collect his bearings. The first thing he did was loosen the harness that had dug into his torso. With enough slack, he slid a hand underneath the triple-stitched nylon and rubbed his chest gentlyâ€”it throbbed. Every time he touched it, even delicately, it stung. He knew his skin would be paying a priceâ€”but the restraint did its job: it kept him alive. He glanced backwards. "Is everyone okay?"

Bill's deep voice called out assuredly, "We're okay."

Ken checked himself for any more injuries. All he had beside the X-shaped bruise over his chest was an insignificant nick on one of his knuckles, the right hand. He leaned forward and gazed out the view port.

"So this is the big wow."

Every surface of the airlock was a whitewash. Floor, ceiling,

wallsâ€”the achromatic color scheme exploited any available luminosity and filled the entire bay with it. The large, circular magnet anchored to the bulkhead fifty meters ahead was the puller, a lengthy contraption, hollowed out and cylindrical. It jutted about a decameter out of the wall. Hypnotic spirals of conductive metal windings lined the entire inside diameter from the aperture to the shadowy distance deeper in. Ken took another glance at the ferrometrics below: all the needles fluctuated in tight movements, perhaps stationary if not for his keen eyesight. They more or less hovered precisely at $90^{\circ} \pm 0.25$.

"We just got tractored in by a hunk of electrified metal. I am officially impressed."

"Well," Chris rasped, "we're still alive, so I am officially _grateful_."

Every survivor in the passenger bay broke free of their restraint harnesses and summarily floated towards the partition jockeying for a good view outside. Bill, Ken and Hendricksson crowded down low with their knees hovering just off the deck. They craned their heads high above the waist-high firewall that separated the forward cabin from the fuselage while Chris and Sergei floated on top of the three, comfortably gazing onward.

Chris stole any sight the limiting view port could provide him, about 120° worth of azimuth. He scanned side to side. There was not a person in sight. "Umm, _now_ what?"

Ken leaned forward and looked down over the Pelican's cowling. "That's what."

The others couldn't see it yet: the massive deck some distance below rapidly approaching to meet the Pelican's ventral surface. Its male locking claws on three sides ratcheted against female columns recessed into respective bulkheads throughout the ascent.

"The landing gear won't be operational, will it?" Chris said.

"Nope, but it doesn't matter." Ken had glanced sidelong out the Starboard window. A stairway of bare steel rose up ten meters along the closest wall and terminated at the doorsill of a smaller, windowed airlock. Blurry figures waited there motionless, presumably watching the Pelican's approach the entire time. "We're landing right here, right where they want us."

The main air lock had fully closed right as the adjustable flight deck gently tapped against the Pelican's flat chine, locking in place. The electromagnets de-energized and the superstructure of the Pelican groaned for a moment before its reinforced, Carbon-fiber belly fully settled onto the polycarbonate surface. All was quiet as invisible, breathable air flooded the cavernous bay through high-flow ductwork far above. There wasn't much to look at from inside the canopy. Much of the deck was empty save for the typical layout of multi-wheeled fuel bladders and robotic loaders stationed around the periphery. Metal tethers wound taught on electro-mechanical winches anchored the equipment to the deck amidst the momentary vacuum and the magnets' switchable influence.

Chris felt uneasy, the fear of the unknown creeping in. He scooted as

far as he could to Port, pressing one side of his face to the bulkhead to get a good angle out the Starboard side. Chris barely noticed them, the crowd gathered on the other side of the windows. From what he could tell in this distant and uncomfortable vantage, they looked like ordinary people dressed in formal attire—businessmen and women. They simply regarded the Pelican with no particular look about them, motionless themselves. "Who do you think they are?"

Sergei pushed his neck far into the cockpit space and took a glance for himself. A fraction of a second was all that he needed. He pushed off the bulkhead and floated towards a seat in the rear hold. "Business folk, just like the ones we know and love, Chris." He grabbed hold of an outstretched strap and reeled himself downward.

"Yeah, well whoever it is, they want to know what we're up to." Chris glanced back to where the FTL hardware spanned down the length of the King Plank. "What do we say if they start asking questions about the batteries in our ship?"

"I don't think it's where we're going that they're particularly interested in. But regardless, we tell them we're transporting batteries to a hub colony. Arcadia or somewhere."

"They'll know that's totally bogus."

"It's the only reasonable explanation available to us, unless you can think of something better."

"They're gonna see we're not company men. They'll know we don't belong in the shipping lanes, much less outside the planet's atmosphere. Look at us. We're a bunch of mangy looking people with no administrator on board to convince them this is legit."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes. Right now, I suggest you all find yourselves a seat before they gravitize this entire place—unless you like hard landings."

With that, everyone still aloft scrambled to their seats. All survivors firmly restrained themselves for the last time.

Moments passed. "They disabled the systems." Chris said. "The hatch will be burned out too. They won't be able to get us out of here."

From somewhere far off, Ken heard a loud _clang! _He then felt his coccyx thump down on the seat cushion. Artificial gravity had taken over.

Ken's gaze was fixed on something outside the windscreen, invisible to his passengers. "I wouldn't say that, Chris." He tracked its movement—off to Starboard and skirting along the lateral line. Seconds later, it passed from his sight.

Ken sighed and hung his head, then glanced back from the cockpit. He regarded them all solemnly. "So much for going home, boys."

A strange whining noise crescendoed, originating a short distance just outside the hull along with a rhythmic pounding. The

amalgamation of bizarre sounds worked its way to the keel, then a noise all too recognizable announced itself right before a shower of sparks punctured the rear hatch and lanced deep into the fuselage. The pinprick of orange glow slowly traced a rectangular outline just inside of the hatch's own reinforced jambs.

"We are so screwed." Chris mumbled.

"No," Sergei boomed above the screeching, "surely we can find common ground with these people. Don't give up now. They wanted us here for something, so let's be sure to keep it that way. We just have to get inside their heads. We have to figure them out, see what it is they need. A deal can be worked out. A deal can always be worked out."

The entire loading ramp moaned as its own weight tore itself from the greater hull. After some audible rearranging, the ramp crashed to the deck. Its heavy thud echoed throughout the bay and into the Pelican. Burnt metal and ozone wafted from the seams still glowing dull-red. Past the improvised exit, a robotic exosuit with a barely-visible occupant stood motionless amidst the smoke and fibrous particulate lingering in the air. It instantly reminded Chris of Doctor Kleiner laboring in the depths of Traxus IX. Its hydraulically-assisted limbs were large and powerful, and fastened to its right 'arm' was a rotary saw the size of Chris' head.

The humanoid chassis extended a clamping appendage and scooped up the severed chunk from the deck, pivoted and walked away with heavy thuds. Instantly rushing up to fill its place was a 5-man paramilitary squad dressed in all-black fatigues, their assault rifles aimed at all the Pelican's occupants. One of them broke ranks and stepped towards the cockpit, his steel-toed boots pattering over the deck. The assumed leader wore a red overcoat with colorful campaign ribbons pinned to the clothing over the left breast. He further identified himself by stepping forward, saying, "Exit this vessel in a single file line with your hands locked behind your heads."

All eyes instinctively went to Sergei. He shrugged and stood slowly.

He did as instructed and proceeded through the smoldering hole. On bended knees he hopped down and regarded the leader before stepping a short distance away, two guns aimed at his torso and tracking his every movement. The remaining survivors in the Pelican's blood tray egressed toward the ledge where the ramp should've assuredly extended to the ground. They followed Sergei coolly, calmly, without incident and were soon joined by Ken as another guard escorted him from the cockpit to their vicinity.

The guards rounded up the group near the massive hatchway. The leader had cold, calculative and remorseless eyes that exuded dispassionate confidence. It was the look of a seasoned, professional soldier, a man with skills so proprietary in nature that employment under a heartless corporation was quite possibly the only means he had to provide for his own family—perhaps a wife and some children far away. Aside from his level-headed gaze, the leader's only other distinct feature was his neatly-trimmed mustache. Without introduction, he cued a radio transmitter attached to one of his padded gloves. "Control, we have five unidentified persons accounted

for in the bay ready for processing, over."

"Roger that," a response emitted, "proceed through airlock alpha. We'll cycle them through. Out."_

"Pat them down." he ordered his squad.

The guards retrieved several firearms—all pistols. The only unarmed subject was Bill, predictably. The leader slung his rifle over his back, momentarily studied the priest and withdrew a black, polymer sidearm. He positioned the barrel a few centimeters off Sergei's abdomen. "Turn around and move."

Sergei led the way to the staircase, red LEDs embedded into the deck his guide. The lot of other survivors was crudely herded into a small cluster with the remainder of black-clad guards formed up behind them, weapons still drawn. They ascended the stairs slowly and calmly, not a word uttered.

Upon reaching the last few steps of the climb, the length of the clear window came within eyelevel, as did a plethora of suit-dressed natives of the ship on the other side of it. They regarded each raggedy-clothed survivor as would patrons observing caged zoo animals, empty-gazed and neutral. The steep-angled stairway transitioned to a wide, perforated steel platform suspended twelve meters high in relation to the modular deck below, and an unknown depth in relation to the bay itself depending on how far down it plunged. A motion sensor tracked the group's movement as they neared the windowed airlock, which parted vertically down the middle and slid open for their entrance. Sergei didn't step in just yet—under the factual premise that he wasn't ordered to. He used that as his own red herring to buy just a few seconds' time. He turned in place and studied the leader's uniform, specifically the insignias attached to his Cardigan field jacket.

"Step in." the leader ordered him.

Sergei had no choice but to obey. Together, they all filed in on his lead. The door now behind them procedurally closed while the next one opened simultaneously, giving way to the ship's reception deck.

It was a wide and almost semicircular layout with the bar and lounge area in the center. The ceiling was low, but not low enough to induce discomfort. A variety of organic flora was positioned near every seating surface, exuding the home-like class of five-star lodging. Wide, waist-high windows featuring space lined the circumference.

Punctually rounding a corner up ahead was another businessman headed straight at them. The white suit he wore contrasted against his tanned complexion, suggesting he spent more time on soil rather than in space, or that he simply got regular access to UV lounges. Something about his step suggested he served in the capacity of a caretaker, a host or steward of the ship. His pace was brisk and snappy, almost jovial and certainly unbecoming of the moment. Nevertheless, his pleasant disposition towards the survivors was disarming despite the situation. Upon reaching conversational distance, he stopped promptly and offered a curt smile to them. "Welcome to the A_c_heron, our flagship. I'm Virgil Alkaios. I know the nature of your arrival seems somewhat disconcerting, but let me

assure you that my superiors wish you no harm and would simply like to ask you some questions about the nature of your presence in this star system."

Ken took a powerful step forward. "What gives you the right to disable my ship? We had no propulsion and no HVAC. What if your EMP affected the electrohydraulics and caused the rear hatch to rupture? You could've killed us!"

Virgil cupped his hands together.

"A necessary risk that had to be taken, you must understand. I know what you're thinking and feeling, believe me. If you don't realize why this has happened to you now, you will soonâ€¦I promise you. Rest assured that you will be looked after throughout the duration of your stay here. Please, come with me."

Chris, who had remained silent thus far, instantly changed. His posture touted straighter and his chest swelled with esteem. "But we choose not to stay here." he said flatly, the staunch tone of his voice booming throughout the deck. The host of the ship darted his eyes downward with sudden astonishment. The boy had unexpectedly acquired incomparable confidence, his presence demanding acknowledgement. "Repair our ship immediately or give us one of equal value, one with translight capability."

Virgil glanced around the periphery at all the onlookers now attentive to the small gathering before him.

"That's not allowable, at least not yet. I don't make the calls around here. I'm just your facilitator." He glimpsed upon each of them with a look that could pass for genuine concern for their well being. "Please, don't make this harder on yourselves, just follow me. The sooner you cooperate, the sooner we can see a resolution to this matter." He spun around to face the ship's interior and started walking. "This is Alkaios. Custody is confirmed." he spoke into a lapel-mounted transceiver. "We're en route to the Charon Lift and will arrive at your location soon."

The survivors exchanged wary glances with one another. Without a word, it was reluctantly decided they would follow him.

Upon this, the security guards providing escort broke off and began mingling with some of the other commoners around the observation room, joining the curious revelry taking place there. The greeter proceeded straight ahead, away from it all. His pace warranted no time for sightseeing, but every so often the wary newcomers attained a focused glance at the wide edifices stemming off either side, presumably places of interest for the ship's regulars. There were gymnasiums, cafeterias, barber shops and other morale-enhancing localities frequented by travelers during the long, dreary stints of interstellar passage. Chris glanced over his shoulder as the clanging together of wine, champagne and martini glasses resounded off every surface of the observation deck and into his ears. He saw the gathering crowd of elitist folk and guards loitering near the windows and condensing together as they toasted their drinks to various triumphs unknown. They carried on in their gossip and snickery, their teeth more like fangs as they laughed. Chris paid them no more attention.

An elevator ahead beckoned, its door already holding open.

None of the survivors had ever been in a lift quite like this one. Instead of a single door, there were four angled 90° from one another, the other three currently shut.

The greeter bee lined for it and together they all filed in, Virgil taking his place closest to the brushed Aluminum console. Most of its surface was adorned by an unpopulated liquid crystal display. He waved his hand over the LCD and numbered icons materialized from within, a dizzying stack dozens of rows high and dozens of columns wide that tapered off into a single, lonely column below it all. Virgil pressed one of the virtual buttons, fifth from the bottom. It shone solid red, an unfriendly chime accompanying the error notification.

"That's strange." he mumbled. "Why isn't it working?"

He pressed it again—same reaction.

"Oh, of course. None of you have been verified so it won't let you in, but I've got a fix for that." he smirked.

Virgil retrieved a tethered key from one of his pockets and inserted it into one of many locks, twisted, and the elevator's doors immediately shut.

"What's that mean?" Chris pointed upward.

Up top near the floor indicator, an inscription read: `_**Vuolsi cosÃ-
colÃ ove si puote**_`

Virgil glanced at the boy, then followed the invisible vector made by his index finger. "You know—I'm not sure. I was always curious about it myself, but I can't read Latin and I never could remember to sit down and look it up."

Bill cleared his throat: "So it is wanted there where the power lies."

The lift began its descent.

The ride down was reasonably short for Hendricksson. Having spent the last 500 years hurtling through space in a lifepod, even if the entire journey was spent asleep, he had developed a profound aversion of confined spaces. The lift stopped soon enough. Each door slid open and Joe breathed easier.

In all four directions, corridors stretched so far out that the ends were nowhere in sight.

The group now resided outside of the cruiser in the fourth of nine, concentric circles that plunged below its ventral surface in an inverted pyramidal fashion. More like an addendum to the greater vessel, each level was accessible only through the central lift they now exited. Virgil and the group had just stepped onto one of many pressurized service ways arranged like an X that adjoined the elevator shaft to the surrounding halo.

The deck of this interconnect—and presumably all

interconnects" had an autopedescalator running the entire length, flanked by narrow aisles of shale-blue shag. Passing one's sight into the blurred distance, the way ahead was as a continuous stepping stone set in a river before them.

The thuds of footsteps were muffled to near-silence as the expatriates traversed the length of the long and wide autowalk on the greeter's lead. The black, vinyl sections drove inexorably onward. Whereas vessels of this tonnage were typically purpose-built and held little to no panache, this area of the ship bared no semblance of the often crude, utilitarian fashion in which slipspace transit was accomplished. Unlike the hangar bay of paint-slathered metal they entered from, there was not one meter of framework or ductwork exposed here. Not even one of countless weld seams showed, which supposedly required third-party, documented inspection at fixed intervals. By the looks of it, there was no easy access to hidden piping, hydraulics or electrical conduits, all of which required vital, routine maintenance. Instead of exhibiting compliance with even the most basic mass transit code, every square inch of bulkhead, deck and deckhead was adorned in some decorative paneling. While most of the captives simply followed Virgil in a straight line, Kaiser Sergei glanced around at the many frivolities surrounding his every footstep. Solid gold picture frames outlined the portraits of corporate execs hanging on either side of the conveyor. Just how much weight had all this luxury added to the total mass? How much more efficiently could the ship traverse space-time without it all bogging the Acheron down? He glanced dead ahead where the interconnect met the curvature of the ring itself.

The greeter slowed his pace, letting the moving tiles simply carry him as he prepared for the transition onto stationary ground again. The group now found themselves at the end of the interconnect, now at the ring itself as Virgil stepped across the wide path bending around them and towards the doorway recessed into the wall of the halo. Extravagant artwork was now on display all around them. Various frames housed dieties' mythical creatures of ancient lore: Pegasus, Medusa, Posiedon. The canvass hanging atop the doorway was the Minotaur, a bull-headed man, eyes alight with fire and horns bristling outward.

Everyone else looked down both lengths of the ring's curved deck as Virgil pushed the doors open. Sergei estimated them to be slabs of solid oak at least half a meter thick. The fourth ring was truly drowning in its own decadence.

The group found themselves at the threshold to a large amphitheater" some sort of grand meeting place for very important persons. The rows of chairs to the right stretched far back, rising parabolically to about ten meters high, a sumptuous cascade of Cherrywood. Wide footboards of solid brass lined the face of every step upwards, matted atop with plush, maroon Berber. The place was unoccupied save for a trio of armed guards waiting at the central podium, its flat top crowded with sophisticated electronics.

"What's this now?" Sergei asked.

Virgil stopped and turned to face him. "This is your identity check. Your hosts like to know who they're dealing with. Please comply. This is just for verification purposes." He nodded, then began walking again. His white suit shone like a signal flare as he strode to the

exit on the far side, and then he disappeared entirely.

One of the guards set his rifle down some premeditated distance from the captives, then stepped closer to the podium and opened the lid of an optical scanner resting atop. "Empty your pockets and place any loose articles at your feet."

There was no protest. All of them did as instructed and had nothing to show but stringy, inside-out linings hanging from the sides of their sandblasted and discolored trousers. During the show and tell, Sergei observed the soldiers in kind.

They each sported closely-cropped haircuts, their heads appearing rounded. Their armament was a diverse carry. Apart from the carbine rifles they hefted, each had twin pistols holstered at both flanks of their web belts. There were Short Mortuary Swords sheathed at their cross-draws as well, which struck Sergei as odd. Any professional soldier would surely favor smaller and lighter tactical knives over heavy, expensive ceremonial pieces. He scrutinized the blades further before he'd lose the chance.

The body material was folded steel, yet it was honed down to mere centimeters wide, tapering to a micrometer edge within a decimeter of the tip. He could make out the subdued waves down the length of the forgings, baring the signature of the annealing used. Sergei had underestimated the swords' capabilities at first glance—they weren't just for show. Being a cutlery enthusiast himself, he knew perfectly well that tempered steel rolled over itself a few times resulted in a strong and hard surface able to maintain a very sharp edge with minimal upkeep, perfect for making short work of primitive hand-to-hand combat for sustained periods. With a quick summary of every functional aspect he was able to spot, he then imagined what they'd be like in-use.

A fighter who'd somehow lost their ability to prosecute combat at a distance through means of firearms could easily hold their opponent at comfortable length with the sword's extensive reach, and it was there at that distance where the weapon was truly the most destructive with its incredibly sharp tip. Therefore, the art of fencing was obviously a design consideration. In a more aggressive situation, the opponent could simply be impaled by its piercing end, the wide girth and long surface capable of inflicting severe internal damage with even a single jab. Only detectable by the shadows they produced, micro-serrations along the edges would allow the handler to eviscerate quite efficiently. And in a situation so tense and unnerving that combative discipline was among lesser concerns, the stout nature of the folded steel could serve to simply bludgeon someone into submission or death.

They were indeed battle-worthy pieces. But even more surprising was the way they effortlessly captivated him with such an archaic, metallic beauty seldom seen in modern human culture. The hand guards were of the half-basket variety, a very intricate casting design featuring loops of braided alloy. Oblate sphereoids shaped the pommels, every one of them a different size and weight in accordance with the owner's swordsmanship and preference of end-balance. With his careful eye he spotted a series of ornate characters scribed into the hilts with masterful precision:

The Good Old Cause

"You," the guard pointed at him, "step forward and place your thumb print on that glass."

"No problem, boss. Just take it easy."

Charged-coupled devices inside the chassis whined to a crescendo, soon sweeping towards the inaudible range as Sergei approached. Bright, fluorescent light radiated upwards, casting some of its luminance at the underside of his facial features.

"Good. Now, follow with the rest of your digits for each light pass, continuing with the index finger. You will scan all ten fingers." He pointed to the first row of seats. "When you're finished, wait over there. Retinal scans will follow."

"And after that?" Chris folded his arms.

"You will be fed."

* * *

><p>After the recording of everyone's biometrics, the group assembled where instructed and they waited.<p>

The leader of the armed trio exited with the scanner device in his grasp some time ago. The two subordinate sentries stood watch in his absence. And Virgil was nowhere to be seen. He took his time, apparently had more pressing matters to attend to at the momentâ€"left them waiting for thirty minutes even after the authentication session was completed and the guards were more or less through with them.

One of them pressed an index finger to his ear and stared emptily into space, clutching the rifle tighter. A moment later, he slung it over his shoulder by the dummy strap and brandished one of his pistols. "Everyone form up at the exit. You're going to the galley."

* * *

><p>The elevator doors parted after an ascent so quick that the upward journey had barely registered to them.<p>

They departed the lift, stepping into one of four interconnects at the third ring.

This corridor was not as lavish as the ones on the fourth ring below, but still well-appointed by shipborne standards. Apparently business was booming for this outfit, but the most interesting aspect of their stint aboard this vessel thus far was not the opulence of their surroundings; it was the fact that the ship was all but bereft of life. At least it seemed that in the deep places. It was as if the elongated halls and the surrounding nine rings were kept empty just for them.

The trek down the interconnect toward the actual ringed portion was long and uneventful. Walking a Traxus IX mile was comparable, only quite a bit more hospitable. Upon finally reaching the intersection where straight met round, the sentry in the lead hooked a vague left

while the other held the caboose of the formation with a single pistol drawn.

The survivors once again glanced outward at the walls of another non-linear aisle. Stemming off both sides were many doorways. To where they led or what they housed was anyone's guess. One particular entryway was atypical to all others, swinging double doors. A wheeled cart slammed into them and the individual pushing it stepped out into the open, pacing away down the bend. A small gout of steam followed him out before the doors rebounded and shut, and the group then became aware of a delicious scent propagating the air current around them. The guards led them through that entrance, straight into the galley.

Other than a few confused looks from culinary professionals laboring about, everything seemed normal. A small table and some chairs were laid between a bank of gas grills and a rack of canned foodstuffs just inside the entrance.

"Sit here," one of them said, "and wait for your meal."

* * *

><p>A single member of the kitchen staff placed a fold-out sawhorse on the deck adjacent to the dining table while two others hefted over a large serving platter. On display were five glasses, a pitcher of ice water, and five plates of bone china with generous servings of Yakisoba artfully arranged. The server laid the dishes in front of each individual along with an array of sterling silver forks. As they returned to their common area, the last of the staff turned and bowed towards them. "Enjoy." he said in broken English.<p>

Chris was the first to dig in. He grasped his utensil and scooped up a mouthful of the wheat noodles and bite-sized beef chunks and began eating. He grunted with satisfaction. The savory meat was so tender that it practically melted upon contact with the fork, perfectly seasoned with crushed pimento peppers and a Beni Shoga garnish that gave an almost citrus aftertaste. By itself, the look on Chris' face spurred the others on.

They ate fervently. Breathing was a secondary concern.

Occasionally, some of the service staff tending to the galley's sanitization and food prep offered compassionate glances at the survivors, and Chris wound up making eye contact with one of them and smiled tiredly. They were all of Asian descentâ€"Chris could tell by their almond-shaped eyes. They hushed some indecipherable dialect to one another from time to time, perhaps a family who traveled and worked together. To Chris, that didn't sound like so bad of a life.

Everyone received seconds upon request, which they devoured at an animal's pace. Their next few moments were spent washing it all down with what water was left and wiping their faces with the supplied napkins.

"_Jeez_," Chris said, "what's with the hurry up and wait? Where's Virgil? I can't wait to get out of here."

Sergei regarded the boy with a roll of his eyes, bearing truth to his

own bored-stiff deportment. He excused himself from the table, gaited over to a nearby wall and leaned his back up against it, his gaze angled up at the fresco-dressed ceiling tiles. The swirl of green and blue-pigmented pixels above was a place for thought. "I hope you enjoyed your meal."

"It hit the spot."

"Good, because it may be quite a long time before the next one." His voice trailed off, "—if there even is a next one."

"What's that?"

"It's all a game." he replied coolly. "Play it wisely. Keep your wits about you."

"What's that mean?"

Sergei's eyes darted all over the room, though the vibe given off by him was one of pristine calm and control. "They're trying to work our nerves."

"I feel just fine."

"Exactly, this is the calm before the storm. Just you wait. They're gonna shock us soon. They're gonna hit us with something unexpected."

"Like what?"

"I do not know the Devil's machinations, all I know is that they will come. But don't be frightened. Put on a face, do whatever you must. They have all kinds of cards up their sleeves, these people. Just be sure to give them nothing in return."

"Why, Sergei? Virgil said the sooner we cooperate, the sooner we can leave."

"Leave? Where's your head at, boy? He said no such thing. That's his illusion. _You_ believe that we'll soon be on our merry way because your own desires outweigh your capacity to comprehend the elegance of his wording. He only said, and I quote, 'we'd see a resolution to the matter.' He did not say we could leave, it wasn't even implied. Well, maybe to you it was. You've got to get smart, kid, and start thinking about the bigger picture here. Once our purpose is served, that's it, it's over. The instant they glean the right quantity and quality of information from us, we're deader than door nails."

"What can we do?"

"Don't talk. Don't respond to any of their questions even if you have truthful answers."

"Do you think they'll torture us? That's what they do to people who won't talk, right?"

"Don't worry about that. I've got this whole thing figured out. You'll be in no such danger by the time they work their way around to me. You'll see."

"What makes you so sure of yourself? We're totally at their mercy."

"Don't think like that. It's what they want you to believe. And _that's_ the Devil, thinking you're powerless."

"Please, don't be a hero and screw this up for everyâ€"

"â€"First of all, kid, observe your surroundings. Less than an hour aboard this ship and already I know there's diverse political forces at work here, some of which may be in competition with one another. I'll find out for sure soon enough, and maybe we can use that to our advantage."

"Explain exactly what you mean." Chris sat straighter.

"The first set of guards that exfiltrated us from the Pelicanâ€|did you get a good look at their uniforms?"

"No."

"I did."

"So...wait. What is it about their uniâ€"

"â€"They would look similar to these ones here in the galley, right?"

"You're saying they're different from each other?"

"Attention to detail, Chris. The ones in the bay had a different kind of patch velcroed to their uniforms than the ones babysitting us now. Not the same employer, these two sets of mercs. Consider them separate armies."

"How can you be certain? What did the emblems look like?"

"The uniforms I saw in the bay had a very simple emblem on them. Didn't see the artwork too well, but I could make out a lowercase 'a' embroidered on."

"And the ones here?" Chris craned his neck and squinted at the two guards standing watch near the broilers. "Rats, I can't see them too well from here."

"I took that initiative earlier." Sergei grinned. "Can you guess who _they _are?"

Chris sighed. "The New Model Army."

"That's right, Chris. A patch with the words Old Ironsides and that fabled acronym below it in bold, block lettering. Our favorite, take-no-bullshit corporate security force, the NMA."

"So you think you can work an angle with this information?"

Kaiser Sergei suppressed the urge to grin. "I'll see what I can do."

* * *

><p>"Ugh," Chris moaned, "I'm so dead."<p>

It was going on another hour.

The wait in the galley was uneventful. After such a voluminous and ferocious intake of food, some of them teetered on the verge of dozing off. Bill sat erect with arms folded and his head pointed down. His eyes were closed, but his lips were moving slowly, perhaps mouthing a prayer. Kens eyes were heavy and leaden, though his posture was active, still alert.

"Why haven't you finished your food?" Sergei asked Chris.

"I ate too fast, couldn't do it."

"If you're not gonna eat that, I will."

"Help yourself." Chris clutched his stomach. "How can you eat like that? So fast."

"You always wanted to be a soldier."

"That's right."

"A tenet of the battle-wise infantryman is to always seize the opportunity for food, drink and rest because the soldier never knows when that opportunity may come again. Could be soon, could be very later, could be never again."

Chris eyed the fluffy noodles Sergei was stuffing his face with, perhaps wishing he'd wolfed it all down earlier and paid an even steeper price than he currently was. But his stomach still ached. There was no way he could even think about another morsel of food. He turned from the sight of it.

"So," Sergei said delightfully, "Live it up every chance you get. And if need be, milk the system in order to do it." He finished by winking at Chris, then looked up at the guards holding their posts near the broilers at the far wall. "Isn't that right, fellas?" he shouted.

They didn't answer. Perhaps the tableside conversation was inaudible from their distance. Whatever the reason, they simply held their watchful eyes on the group without reaction.

"You roundheads are about as lively as corpses! I know you're highly trained and all, but did they take away your ability to speak? C'mon, be human for once!"

Still, no answer.

"Easy, Sergei." Hendricksson spoke coolly. "Don't antagonize them, they're just doing a job. Let's save our energy for the boss man, aye?"

Sergei's eyes narrowed, examining them. Nothing anyone said had any effect on the soldiers' bearing. They remained perfectly still, perfectly alert. Nothing could faze them. Sergei was right: they were extremely well-trained. The guard Sergei currently studied was

probably early-twenties, boney cheeks, barely any facial stubble, not quite a kid anymore but still had more to experience, no doubt. Sergei took his mind off them and savored the food Chris had relinquished, eying the mouthful aboard his fork.

"Hmm, this stuff tastes remarkably fresh. No freeze-dry staleness. Definitely not synthetic. Must've gotten this batch of food from the last colony they docked at. These people really do have wealth to spare. We're the most lowly guests at the dinner table and they offered us some pretty decent hospitality."

"Could just be loaded with Sodium to give you the illusion of flavor."

"Good point. It would raise our blood pressure, too. Chip away at our cool, make us less calm and more ripe for the questioning."

"C'mon, we're thinking too much!" said Chris.

Sergei eyed the sentries again before he'd inevitably lose future opportunities. He could feasibly exploit a potential weakness if he had more time, but a pack of individuals on approach could be heard echoing off the galley's solid surfaces. Hard-soled shoes tapped against the ceramic tile the moment they entered. All the survivors stood, listened and waited for them to round the bend.

It was a blitz of black coats by the time their presence officially permeated their vicinity, their pace swift by the tempo of the footfalls. As one, the cooks and sous chefs and custodians ceased their activities and stiffened almost immediately upon making eye contact with the incoming horde. It was blatantly evident in their body language that some of them considered the option to dart away, but there they remained—petrified with their slanted, oriental eyes widening.

Sergei simply shook his head as the black-suit posse came into view.

"Now's the time to put on that face, Chris."

None of them broke stride as they rounded the way and immediately moved in on the survivors huddled near the refrigeration units. That's when the ship's help finally scampered into the unlit recesses of the galley. The ranking member of yet another mob paid no notice to the soldiers on guard duty and introduced himself indirectly to the group by inspecting them at first, particular scrutiny being devoted to Sergei. "Okay, let's get them to where they need to be." he ordered his cohorts. None of the ship's men drew any weapons; they simply gestured the way to the next destination as if compliance was a requisite to existence.

Sergei pushed himself off the wall and happily left the place he'd been floundering about for the past hour. Hesitantly at first, everyone else followed single file. Chris gave the new leader a wily glare as he passed under his looming shadow, following closely behind Bill.

Once more, the survivors were herded across the length of an interconnect and to the lift, soon on an ascent toward the first ring.

* * *

><p>For the last thirty minutes, Chris had nothing to look at but six sides of tedium encompassing him, five of which were cold steel and one of which was a reflection of himself.<p>

The interrogation chamber was dead silent, possibly soundproof. The walls were bareâ€”just rust-inhibiting primer slathered over them. The one-way window likely had a technician behind it recording all of Chris' audiovisual emanations. The crude contours of the metal chair he sat on were digging into his hamstrings, cutting off circulation to his lower legs and feet. His spinal alignment was unsupported and his muscles began to ache, then his vertebrae after enough time. He shifted but the action did him no good, just riled up the awareness of his agitated nerves all the more.

The fluorescent tube overhead had no cover and blazed, saturating the room with a solid-white glow. Its ballast buzzed like a mosquito swarming about his ears. The sheet metal table was hastily welded together, the support legs bearing rust at every jagged bead. The surface of the table itself was also covered in an oxidized film of grey primer, splotches of it bubbled up and peeling. Situated on the opposite side was another chair, and that was it; the room was empty aside from these static pieces. The solitude was bearing down on him. Chris stared at the table top. Splattered across its surface were patches of white. Chris bent his head closer and sniffed. He smelled bleach. Closer now, he focused harderâ€”|

Clinging to the edges of the stains were droplets of dried-up blood.

Just then, a rectangular panel of steel dense as the surrounding walls suddenly flew open, screeching on corroded hinges. Chris jerked his head up. Through the doorway, a brighter light from outside crested over the shoulders of whoever opened it, the face partially obscured. The silhouette entered, closed the door behind, and stepped inward.

"Hello, Christopher."

The voice sounded early-thirties, and somewhat forthcoming like a gentleman captor. But it was common, gut instinct that a gracious host in such a setting was to be treated outright suspiciously. And Chris knew malice could take on multiple forms, grotesque and fair.

"I'm Agent Salinger." He pulled out the chair and took a seat, now low enough for Chris to get a good look at his face from across the table. Nothing was particularly intimidating about the man, just that he could be mistaken for a co-worker or next door neighbor. He flexed his arms outward, letting the suit's fabric rest naturally over his upper torso. The man got comfortable despite the austere appointments of the room. "I'm going to ask you some questions and then you'll be free to leave this place. At first they'll seem easy and ordinary. The longer we go on, the stranger they'll sound, but you must answer them truthfully. Do you understand?"

Chris nodded.

"What's your last name?"

"Dunedyne."

"Say that again slowly so the recorders can get it."

"Doon-eh-dine."

"So, who are those people with you, Christopher Dunedayne.?"

Chris then glued his eyes on the table. "They're my friends."

"You're pretty young to be consorting with them. What was taking place aboard your ship?"

"I'm not sure I have a good answer for that."

"It's okay, son, you can tell me. I'm here to help."

"Look, sir, I'm pretty tired. I need rest. Will this take long?"

"That depends on your willingness to cooperate. Now, the question..."

"So much happened in the last few days and I haven't got much rest. I'm not sure where to begin."

"Just start out by answering what I just asked you."

"I don't know much about what was happening."

"Well, that's interesting. Did you get hit in the head?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Have you experienced profound memory loss from physical trauma?"

"Well, noâ€|"

"Then you can answer the question."

"I don't know what to tell you. I'm not sure that what I say will be what you want."

"Just tell me the truth. Tell me what you're doing way out here in this star system. Tell me how you got your hands on a military-grade vessel, and for the love of God tell me how you tucked away a slipspace drive so beautifully inside it."

"We were transporting batteries to sell at Arcadia."

The agent gave a bitter beer face and stood up. The backs of his knees pushing the chair out made an awful screech that made Chris wince.

"If that's the route you want to take, then that's your choice. Now

I'm going to look for answers from the others, and if I get the answers I want then what good are you afterwards? Did you think of that?" Salinger gaited towards the door.

"What are you talking about?!" Chris shouted. "Look, can I just get some rest and some water. I can't think when I'm not...comfortable."

"I might've been more generous if you didn't treat me like an imbecile. Everyone knows Arcadia was glassed. Happened a long time ago."

"Ok, I'm sorry for that. But still, don't treat us like a bunch of prisoners. We have rights, you know. We'll give you answers in time, but you gotta give us some things."

"Nope. I only deal with facts, so I don't appreciate stories. And I know you're just stalling. Right now it's rest and water. Next time it'll be a phone call home." The agent turned back to him just shy of reaching the exit. "Someone is going to talk, Chris. I hope it winds up being you, I really do. You probably just got dragged along for the ride without a choice. Don't hold out for them. They don't care about you. Next time, just give them up and we'll make sure you get a clean slate. It'll be like this whole thing never happened."

"What about us getting some answers here? Why are we being detained? What did we do? You'd get in huge trouble if any authorities were to learn of this."

"Tell me right now what you were doing on that planet."

"Actually, we were just leaving." Chris rolled his eyes.

"What is your involvement with the Traxus Heavy Industries?"

"Hello? I'm sixteen years old. I can't even drive a motor vehicle yet."

"Who are you working for?"

"Jesus, I cannot believe this."

The agent opened the door and remained for a moment before exiting.

"This was your first chance, Chris, and you blew it. I'm going to meet with someone else now. If they wind up telling me what I need to hear, then I'm afraid helping you will be out of the question. Think it over. I may or may not be back depending on what happens next. If you are lucky enough to get another visit from me, I suggest you capitalize on that opportunity and play ball."

* * *

><p>"William Santhouse, born twenty-five twenty at Prith City, Arcadia." Agent Salinger read without enthusiasm from the screen of a datapad. "Choir boy, attended Saint John's Seminary College, an overall clean soul in a dirty universe. Your record states you volunteered for UNSC. You commissioned into the Chaplain Corps. How thoughtful of you. What is it you carry out other than God's

will?"<p>

"That is all I do."

"And I'm supposed to believe that because you wear the white cloth around your neck?"

"You can believe what you will. That is your right."

"Then, Father Santhouse, I choose to believe that there's a little more than meets the eye with you. It's pretty out of the ordinary to see a priest in orbit around Traxus Nine. You can bypass any pain and suffering and just tell me what connection you have with the Traxus Heavy Industries."

"I hold no greater connection than what you'd have. Wherever travelers go, why shouldn't there be those like me to accompany and comfort them?"

"I never looked at it that way, William. How interesting." Salinger rocked in his seat, feigning a comfort on its rigid surface. He cocked his head to the side, studying Bill, and then rose slowly. He slid the chair in before he left his place. He strolled around the table and teasingly walked two fingers over the surface, coming to a stop behind the priest. He placed his hands around Bill's shoulders, slowly rubbing.

"C'mon, Bill," the agent whispered softly, "this isn't your cross to bear. Set yourself free and tell me what I need to know about these guys. No one's gonna blame you if you look out for numero uno this time around."

Bill answered with silence.

"It's for the best, Bill. So much is at stake now. I'd like to see you go on more than any of the others. Most of 'em are dirtbags. They don't deserve the kind of special treatment you do."

"All of us are the same."

Salinger removed his hands. "Did you know that your homeworld was destroyed by the Covenant some years ago?"

"No, I did not know that. Why do you ask?"

"Oh," Salinger shrugged, "no particular reason. I just thought you'd like to be in the loop of things."

Bill nodded. "Appreciated."

Salinger huffed and left the room.

* * *

><p>The suited agent walked in, removed his jacket and hung it on the chair's back, then rolled up the lengthy sleeves of his pique shirt.<p>

He removed a datapad from his left pocket and set it on the table, face down. He was clean-shaven, sported a faded flat-top hairdew,

likely prior service, Sergei gathered.

"You already know how this works, Mister Sergei. I could give you the riff-raff that I do everyone. I could tell you we have magnetic resonance imagers pointed at your skull right now, analyzing your brain activity. I could say that we have infrared sensors monitoring spikes in blood temperature, ultrawideband radar checking for elevated heartbeats, cameras looking at pupil dilation...I could even break out the Sodium Pentathol needles if you really want to play hard-to-get. But all that would do me no good here. I've done my research on you. You're a sociopath. You're an expert liar. You don't care, so therefore I don't care. And I'm gonna know if your story doesn't check out, so you're going to provide me answers in exchange for your timely release. You can be on your way and back to crime in no time. Are we on the same page?"

"You're looking for information about THI's operations, but I can't help you there. I didn't work for them, I worked against them." Sergei grinned. "You know about as much as I do."

"And the others in your party?"

"If you want intel on your competitor, yeah, I'd ask them. I'm sure they'd be more than happy to assist you. Come back my way if I can be of other assistance."

* * *

><p>Joe Hendricksson scowled as the agent who called himself 'Salinger' entered his cell.<p>

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Joseph Hendricksson."

"That your real name?" Salinger chose to stand. For some reason, he preferred to distance himself from this interrogatee. He stretched out his arms and buttressed his weight into the chair opposite of Joe. "You don't look like much, Joe, but I imagine that's the idea. How many people have you killed in your lifetime?"

"I've never killed any human."

"Ever _order _the killing of anyone?"

"That's a different story."

"Isn't it always." Salinger nodded. "You don't exist in any database. What's a guy like you doing with these people?"

"That's one thing I can't tell you."

"I see. Understand that you're in my control now. Your superiors or handlers or _whoever_ won't ever have the chance to find you as long as you're here. And here I intend to keep you until you help me out. This is a two-way street. Do we understand one another?"

Joe nodded, already knowing that all his superiors were five-hundred years buried in the dirt somewhere. All he had to do was remain silent and the others would work something out, somehow. He wondered

how Sergei was holding up and what kind've treatment he'd received so far.

* * *

><p>"Kenneth Sopher, you were commissioned into the United Nations Space Command officer corps in twenty-five thirty-five. You had a spotless and distinguished record as a combat aviator for nearly six years, attaining the rank of lieutenant before you went AWOL, and I don't particularly care either. I just wanted you to know who you're dealing with. I have a certain amount of power and resource at my disposal. How I use that power next is largely your decision. Tell me how you got a hold of a military-grade vessel."<p>

Ken jerked his head to the side and blonde strands of his hair flung away from his face, allowing him to get good eye contact with Salinger. "Go fuck yourself."

* * *

><p>An hour later, the door to Sergei's cell opened again.<p>

The agent entered and paced straight to the mirror where he momentarily gazed, loosening his tie and unbuttoning his shirt collar. Salinger then took a seat across from Sergei, removing the datapad just like before, only this time he retrieved the stylus embedded into its plastic frame and poked at the touchscreen.

"Bad news. Your friends won't budge. You know what this means?"

"That you can't get a business loan because your market research is inadequate?"

"Funny." Salinger smiled, setting the device down between them. "That's actually pretty good. No, as it turns out, you're the only one left I can rely on for information. I have to start ridding myself of the excess now, one by one." Salinger winked. "Gotta remove the others."

Sergei rolled his eyes. "Remove them how?"

"We have several single-serving airlocks. Want to start talking now?"

"You should tell your bosses I have a counter-offer to propose."

"I'd like to hear what makes you think they're even willing to listen."

"I may not know very much about THI, but we can help one another in different ways. I'm very much plugged in throughout the galaxy. I have certain interests aligned with yours and I've got the connections to see them carried out. And it's not what you knowâ€|it's _who_ you know. Just allow me access to an outgoing line."

"Yes," the agent scooped up the datapad with a deft swipe, "as it turns out, this is perfect timing. I just downloaded the entirety of

your background information and you've got quite the résumé. Let's take a look at what you have to offer...

"Miroslav Sergei, born twenty-five oh-four on Russia Two, leader of several high-profile Koslovic remnant factions during your residence at four outer-rim worlds where your involvement in the galactic drug trade set record levels of traffic at the interstellar tier. Miroslav Sergei, prime suspect in a number of federal racketeering cases detailing the sudden disappearance of highly classified conceptual military hardware valued at over four trillion credits. Miroslav Sergei, wanted for mass fraud and cyber-intrusion activities that led to the three-day crash of the Galactic Stock Market's Communications and Information sector. Miroslav Sergei, quite possibly responsible for the death of three federal agents, a state department official and three soldiers before heading to Traxus Nine for obvious reasons." Salinger sat back with an uncontrollable smile. "Mister Sergei, you've got a helluva lotta dirt on you. And _that_ _was_ just a summary of your profile! It seems criminal life is seldom discrete."

Sergei bowed his head low, appreciatively. "One does what one can in these times. But run me over if I'm wrong to say that you've got a keen uptake on things."

"Ever get tired of life on the run?"

Sergei stifled a yawn. "Lack of privacy is simply a routine aspect of my occupation as much as any other chosen profession, just manifested in a different fashion."

"Please, elaborate."

"Surely you're not serious. Everyone's life is an open book. Your company keeps tabs on _you_ in one way or another, right? Your home address, your contact information, blood type, felony and misdemeanor records," Sergei winked, "your credit worthiness. Other personally-identifiable information you may not even be aware of is all on tap. All these pieces of information determine what kind of name you make for yourself when you live under the control of the United Earth Government."

"So, what kind of name have you made for yourself at Traxus Nine? You don't have to answer that. We know Traxus Nine is full of people just like you, so it's kind of a moot point in asking. You know if you weren't so biased against government authorities you'd find yourself far more marketable with your skill set. The variety of locales can certainly improve for you."

Sergei gave a curt nod. "That's an impressive gadget you've got there. How many gigs worth of data have they got on me?"

"Like I said, a lot of dirt."

"I'm no mathematician or anything, but I'd postulate that fifty percent of that file is true, while another fifty percent is bullshit, and the remaining fifty percent is just straight-up lies."

"Look, if you still think this is entertainment right now, all this small talk, keep trying me and see how deep I can dig. I can go way

back if you know what I mean, _Colonel_. Now is not the time to be cute with me, I assure you. No one's watching this space. There's no UNSC for a light-decade in every direction, which means your ass belongs to me. You can skip the charade and give me something useful, or I'll start to jettison bodies."

A smile materialized on Kaiser Sergei's face, a smile so subtle that no sensory equipment housed behind opaque glass could detect it. He took a deep, cleansing breath as if he currently resided at a mountain top. "Okay, great show you've got with the voyeur treatment inside this sweat box, almost novelty-like. Did you remember to crank up the temperature on the thermostat? Now, allow me to state _my_ observationsâ€¦"

"You were once federally employed or in military service yourself judging by your attitude. You got out because military life wasn't your cup of tea, the selfless service and day-to-day sacrifice of it all. Your work suffered because of your attitude towards authority and the overwhelming responsibility placed in your hands was more pressure than you could handle. You eventually stopped taking advantage of the taxpayer-funded training opportunities as your morale approached rock bottom. You became less effective in your unit, a weak link in the chain so you didn't really get along with your colleagues. After your discharge, of whichever nature it was, you took your training and experience into the civilian sector working with these types of folks along with bigger payout, more freedom, but the training ceases. You got rusty, not the man you once were in your craft. Now, anyone can see you're sloppy around the edges, your posture too stiff and your face speaking confusion even though you checked yourself in the mirror over there before sitting down. Even your associates know it but continually choose not to burden you with the truth because it would only slow operations down and there's a shortage of human intelligence professionals due to the War being in full swing, so they make do with you and figure it's good enough to get by. But you and I both know it's not always good enough. And it's highly probable you're the substance of their gossip during mess hall chatter. They mock your technique and create long-standing, inside jokes in your name. The jokes become hackneyed to the point where your name is nothing more than an association to all things foolish. But there's always a brighter side to things as well. To your credit, you get the job done most of the time. You've been able to gather and sort solid information and pass it on to the right people, hence your presence here and now. But now I'm inclined to wonder where exactly you attained this information on me, because surely you couldn't access it through the unofficial channels currently available to you as a freelancer. In this light, it's obvious you have connections of some worth as well. Guess if you're gonna find dirt on a dirty person, occasionally you've gotta get dirty yourself. Commendable. You're good, Agent Salinger, but you're not _that_ good. Far more effective interrogators have dealt with me before, all to no avail. Maybe it's time to broaden _your_ _skill set and leave this business. Let the big fish swim, eh?"

Salinger sat stone-faced.

He was good at maintaining composure, very good. It was the keystone of an agent's job to keep cool. Staying power was at the very core of social engineering. If you couldn't evince the believability of your act, you'd lose all leverage. Your time and efforts would be all for naught. Even after Sergei's barrage, there was nothing available to

exploit in the agent's eyes or body language—nothing that suggested defeat. There was no regret, no frustration, no tensing of the muscles or weakness in those hard eyes, absolutely no conceding the ground he might've gained, nothing. Sergei had zero momentum to build upon.

But after a moment into the face-off, an infinitesimal twitch materialized in the shade of Salinger's eye. He knew Sergei picked up on it, but nevertheless stared down his subject in silence, analyzing, salvaging, his self-control tomblike stable. He looked over his shoulder into the mirror. "We're wasting our time."

"Thanks for reminiscing with me." Sergei added. "I do miss the old times."

The king of Traxus IX's underworld watched a wordless Agent Salinger retrieve the datapad and push his chair out.

"It's nice to have a network of professionals at your disposal, isn't it, Agent Salinger? They feed you intel, prep you for this session, even offer a little friendly encouragement when it's tolerable." Sergei tapped an index finger against his own forehead. "I did all that with just this."

Straight-faced, the suit stood up and left the room, taking with him whatever dignity he still had.

As the door closed, Sergei leaned back in his metal chair and balanced on two legs, aiming his steely gaze straight into the reflection of himself. "Get me a negotiator, not an interrogator!"

35. Every Survivor's Got a Story

****_Every Survivor's Got a Story_****

Over an hour had gone by since Chris' last meeting with the agent.

The only meal he received was already eaten. He had nothing now, and there was no one to make a request to. No drink despite his thirst, not even something new to occupy his sights—just his own reflection staring back with droopy, bloodshot eyes.

He took a good look into the mirror: his nerves were already shot. His weight pressed against the unforgiving contours of the metal chair, and they pushed back. He felt the urge to stand and stretch, but wasn't sure if that would incite some punitive action against him from whoever occupied the room beyond the mirror. He bent down and loosened the barbed slide-fasteners of his boots a few notches, instantly feeling relief across the tongue of his footwear. The blood in his lower extremities began to flow more freely. Of the total time he'd been confined to the interrogation chamber, he caught a vicious chill during the last quarter-hour, which he'd sweated out as quickly as it came. His mind played all the tricks on him it could. All the questions zooming around in his head had settled into indifference. All his worries became negligible by his higher brain functions, for he realized he had zero control over the situation.

He sighed easily and sat in a relative peace, staring into nothing, the walls now part of his thoughts. There was no more fear of the unknown, of death, of others' well being. All that remained was a growing restlessness accompanied by the buzzing of the light's power supply.

The door swinging open didn't startle him this time.

A lone security guard stood beyond the threshold in half-shadow, the door held open. There were no agents to be seen.

Something flew through the air, invisible for the first second of flight. Then, a vacuum-sealed container landed on the table with a _smack!_

"Change."

Chris grasped the hardened plastic and twisted the embedded spigot clockwise. The packaging took on outside air through its O-ringed port with a hiss. Once inflated, a thin strip of bright-orange became visible near one edge. Chris instinctively pressed his fingertip along its length and chemical deposits inside the film spread out and broke the covalent bonds holding the casing together. The plastic softened and withered open. He reached inward and pulled out a full-body microfiber lining, blue jeans fitted exactly to his waist and inseam, a hooded sweatshirt and brown-leather boots.

"Have yourself at the briefing room in fifteen minutes, quadrant one. Don't be late, we'll be watching."

The guard paced away, and soon his footsteps faded out of earshot. The door was left propped open.

Chris breathed deep and bowed his head, collecting himself. Though not entirely free, he was allowed to see something new for a change. Of that, he was grateful.

He brought his hands to bear, stretched them and contracted them as if talons, wringing out the tension. He slowly pushed his chair out and stood.

He wasted no time and stripped out of his ragged, frayed clothing. He put on the microfiber lining first. An instant of invigoration spread out over his skin as if diving into a pool of spring water. The flexible, one-piece undersuit contained active nanocytes that wicked away moisture, bacteria and odor, cleansing his body more thoroughly than a hot shower. He changed into the rest of his clothing, running a hand through his messy hair for good measure. He stepped slowly to the threshold and glimpsed both ways down the first ring's curvature, which was more drawn-out than the eight smaller ones below it. He couldn't remember where exactly in the circumference he'd been for this last length of time, just that the walk to his cell was long and hurried. A kiosk embedded into the ring's bulkhead not a few meters across the aisle beckoned to him.

He took a deep breath and gaited across the corridor to the monolithic stand. It was a photonic projection display, capable of detecting physical interaction. It was currently unpopulated and dark. Chris glanced both ways again—"no one else out there"—only he occupied this stretch of the ring. He placed his attention back to

the kiosk, waved a hand over the surface and animated images materialized in front of him: nine rings, one of which was slightly enlarged. A bright-green icon in the shape of a male human pulsed there with a 'You are Here' caption pulsing dim-to-bright and back again. Each of the rings were divided into distinct sections with small, expandable icons hovering nearby, waiting to be explored in further detail upon his input. "Destination, please." a synthesized, female voice prompted.

"Quadrant One?"

"Follow the yellow lights and enjoy your walk."

From Chris' position, a trail of LEDs glowed as Sol illuminated near the baseboard, bounding alongside the curved hall's inner race and out of sight. Chris started down that direction and began his new journey.

Chris' equilibrium was off as he circumnavigated the first ring. The path bent forever to the right in this clockwise direction, and the ceiling was equally low as the cell he happily left. Such was his entire passage towards the briefing room in quadrant one. After a few moments of forlorn nausea, he reached a more bustling sector of the halo. Other, newer sights and sounds began to occupy his cognizance, the boy no longer relegated to solitude and the singular presence of the ship's own resonant hum as it lazily drifted in a GS-orbit high above the equator of Traxus IX.

This section had no windows, just offices branching off from the main aisle that he traversed. Various passerby regarded him with brief, blank glances before zooming off to their places of business. Kiosks identical to the one he'd accessed earlier were spread over intervals on both sides of the corridor. Steadily onward, the same synthesized voice droned on about something inaudible for the moment. Currently, the kiosks lied dormant and displayed loops of promotional footage: workers in hardhats banding crates together, palletizing them under foremen's watches, wheeling them into airtight containers and watching them ascend space elevators into the sky while holographic A.I.s liaised with plant managers in closed offices. A few more footsteps and Chris wandered into the range of highly directional voice drivers recessed into the deckhead, and the automated words were suddenly clear.

"_The Executive Staff of Tterrab Industries would like to welcome you to the _Acheron. _Hailed as a technological wonder upon its maiden voyage one year ago, you can feel safe and sound wherever your journey takes you aboard our flagship. Convenience and indulgence is our charter. You can effortlessly accomplish any work, stay connected with loved ones far away, or just enjoy the array of homelike amenities. You will certainly feel accommodated during your stay with us. You won't even know you've left home."_

Chris glanced around: all of the two-sided kiosks scattered in each direction displayed the same thing, now a hard-hatted technician aboard a space station scanning barcodes with some hand-held device.

"_Tterrab Industries has recently patented highly secure, cryptographic archival solutions that enable accurate documentation of local and long-haul cargo manifests with one-hundred percent

reliability, security, and non-repudiation that you'd expect from a brand name shipping company. You'll know exactly where your shipment is at any time, and you'll know precisely when it was delivered to the intended recipient. In fact, our service is so dependable that we are now the prime GSA contract holder for the UNSC Department of Commercial Shipping. If it's got their business, you know it's the real thing. Never again will you lend uncertainty to the status of your parcels when you entrust Tterrab with your credit. You'll always have piece of mind. And in a galactic business world, piece of mind can be the one thing that makes or breaks your deal._

"_To inquire about careers with Tterrab Industries or any of its subsidiaries, please contact Virgil Alkaaios, referenced in our locator terminals. Thank you for your patronage and enjoy your stay with us."_

Chris stopped momentarily in the corridor, spinning around and taking in the amalgamation of sights and sounds. It all did a wonderful job of alleviating his vertigo. Before he got much time to sightsee and intercompare what occupied his senses, the yellow light assigned to him started to strobe, directing him onward. He sighed and resumed.

Sergei emerged from a nearby doorway up ahead, striding to the middle of the corridor. They spotted one another. Both paused in mid-stride.

The man was no longer dressed in the rugged, slapdash clothing that had been subjected to Traxus IX's sandblasting treatment. No more denim covering the body and no more thick rubber covering the soles of his feet. No more damaged, disheveled hair. He was at the pinnacle once again.

The man had attained VIP status aboard the _Acheron _judging by appearance alone, enveloped in a well-hemmed and freshly pressed suit, chocolate-black. Solid ivory buttons cascaded down the placket and the slashcut collar seemed congruous to the sharp lines of his clean-shaven face. The once grey head of hair was now jet-black and untangled, slicked back and glistening. Instead of the cleated boots he traversed the rugged clay with the last decade, chlorophram slip-ons now shone in the light and Chris's face reported back to him in an imprecise fashion amidst their form-fitting contours.

"How you doing, kid? Are your sea legs holding out?"

"Okay." Chris eyed him up and down again, slowly approaching. "How are _you_?"

"Me? I'm _great_. Man, you should've seen the look on Salinger's face earlier. Looked like he was about to OD on pills and cry all night after I was done with 'em." Sergei glanced both lengths of the corridor with a content smirk. "Ahh, when are they ever gonna learn? Hey, I'm stoked you're still alive!"

The feeling Chris got as Sergei beamed at him was so hard to process. He wasn't sure what to make of it. A grin coming from Kaiser Sergei was usually accompanied by some sobering truth or an awful event that would, or already had come to pass. This certainly wouldn't have been the first time Chris felt mistaken when tallying up his own views of the man, but Sergei actually looked genuinely happy to see him. It

seemed strange, as if the vertigo had come back full force, dizzying his mind.

Sergei leaned into his line of sight, brow raised. "Have you seen the others?"

"Just about to ask you the same."

"I think we'll find out soon enough. I just hope Salinger didn't jump the gun when he started talking about airlock executions."

"What?"

"Relax, it was probably just empty talk. Most of it is."

"So," Chris pointed at Sergei's clothing, "does all this mean we're free to go?"

"We have one last issue to hammer out."

"And we can leave?"

"I saw them weld up a new hatch on the bird and run pressure tests if that says anything."

Chris nodded. "I don't know how you did it, but you did it."

"Feels good to be clean and wear fresh clothes, doesn't it?"

"I guess."

"You guess. Did they feed you like I asked of them?"

"Yeah."

"How was it?"

"I'm not gonna lie. It was the best meal I had in years. They said the steak was called a Del Monico. But I think I might've gotten sick from it."

"That's because it's _real _food. A fatty cut of meat if I recall correctly. They could've provided better. Oh well. Don't worry, you'll get used to real food again."

"And I see things went very well for you. Still speak the lingo after all this time in the lower reaches?"

Sergei's suit flowed like a second skin covering him as he chuckled. "What the Hell do you mean, kid?"

"Look at you. You got yourself a sweetheart deal. It doesn't take a genius to see that."

"You could say I secured a sweet deal for _everyone_."

Chris sighed, "What'd you do now?"

"Hey-hey, relax. I just did you and everyone else the best favor

you'll ever get in life. You'll see that soon enough." he nodded.

Chris resumed his walk again to Quadrant One. "Uh-huh, just give it to me straight. I'm not up for anymore surprises. I've had about all I can take."

"Hey, I'm _always_ up for straight talk." Sergei followed after Chris, soon spanning the gap. "Straight talk is so hard to come by these days. It's always guessing and feeling your way around. That's why I like it when we talk. You're up front with me. And because of that, I can be up front with you."

"Okay, talk."

"Look, I can't tell you _exactly_ what went down, you wouldn't understand."

"Kaiser, if you've condemned usâ€"

"â€"I'd sooner condemn _myself_ than an innocent kid."

"You didn't make a deal you couldn't back out of, did you?"

"What would be the point of a deal otherwise?"

"We're talking about our lives here, Sergei."

"To treat with the Devil, you must first enter Hell."

"Oh, God, more quotes? Give it a rest already."

"Chris," Sergei sighed for effect, "if the Devil told you that you could leave Hell as long as you didn't look back, could you agree to that?" Sergei palmed his sleeve back and checked his watch, a burgundy-tinted masterpiece of craftsmanship. "Look, we're due for a meeting up ahead in five minutes, our last meeting with these people."

"I know, they told me too. You know, the whole time down there when everyone was working togetherâ€|this is after you had a gun to my head in the factory break roomâ€|I watched you every time one of your men fell. I made it a point to do so. From my observation you didn't feel much, nothing much at all. Nothing other than anger, but anyone would feel that because the burden of our mission increased with less people to carry it."

"Listen to yourself, kid. _Mission._ You sound like Justin."

"What's wrong with sounding like Justin?"

"He may have been a good shot and a cunning leader, but he was a bad man overall. He killed Jaggo in cold blood, remember?"

"I do remember that, but in his mind it was war. He'd been living there for ten years, not me. You two had a past that I was only vaguely aware of the entire time. I had to keep reminding myself that some people were just naturally _bad people_. Sometimes I couldn't understand why Justin treated certain people differently than others, and sometimes I didn't _want_ to understand, but he had good reasons

looking back. And I don't blame him when I take everything into account. But if I was the one in charge, I wouldn't have done itâ€”killed Jaggo. That's the difference between me and Justin."

"Don't think I didn't care for my men, I did. I had to rise to power before I could project it. Whenever someone tries to stand out among clans in an attempt to unite them against a larger threat, there's always going to be friction. They understood the vision and they chose to fight for that cause on their own free will, and they deserve better than petty laments from a single man. They deserve a just conclusion to what they fought for all these years alongside me."

Chris stopped walking. "And what conclusion is that?"

"The overhaul of all governments. No one can ever be free so long as shadow corporations rule by proxy. Now, shall we walk to our destination together?"

"Might as well," Chris shrugged, "we're not going anywhere."

Chris resumed.

"Indeed we aren't for the time being." Sergei replied, a certain catch in his voice as he approached Chris' side.

"Nice Titanium watch. No extra charge?"

"Told 'em the one I had was broken. Always milk the system, kid."

"You'll milk anything."

In lockstep, Sergei and the boy strode in a clockwise direction about the curved path as various business persons berthed around them at brisker speeds.

"You're a very smart boy, Chris. Smarter than me."

Chris warily glanced upward. He briefly made eye contact with Sergei and then immediately broke it off.

"But it's pretty obvious you've still got a lot to learn." he added. "You think you're the center of the universe, but you're not. You think you're gonna join the armed forces, go off and make a difference. We're just insignificant little specs, you and me. We're not gonna change the world. We're not gonna win this War. No one's gonna care when we die..."

"Which many signified that you should bite and snarl and play the dog like me."

"Shakespeare?"

Sergei smiled. "Very good."

"What are you getting at?"

"You're a ghost, Chris. We're all just ghosts. You, me, and everyone

that escaped, we are but gears in the greater machineâ€¦except now we've spun right off the shaft. We're off the grid and no longer powerless to decide our own fate anymore. This is your chance to really live your life. Stop playing by their rules because you know it's never fair to yourself when you do. Join me, and together we could be unstoppable."

"You can't be serious. I helped you down there, no, teamed up with you down there to one end and to one end alone: to find escape. That's as far as our partnership went."

"So what will you do now? Will you join the fighting force of a hopelessly corrupt system? Put your life on the line for a series of lost and unjust causes? You'll just immerse yourself in the propaganda they'll so happily force-feed you along with those horrible, aged rations. Is that how you want to live this one life given to you? You've witnessed enough down there to know better."

"The Covenant is the bigger threat. We can all be united against that."

"Can you really serve them after all you have been through? Can you do it knowing the great UNSC turns a blind eye to all the evils you've witnessed just on Traxus Nine? Imagine what you'll find on other worlds now that your eyes are open."

Chris didn't answer.

"C'mon, kid, don't look so down. You've gotta put your game face on now more than ever." Sergei reeled in closer to Chris with a playful glimmer in his eyes. "It's October on Earth. Do you know what that means? New fiscal year. The money will get printed, the contracts will spread like wildfire, people will labor, businesses will produce and the corporate fatcats and their shareholders will soak up the profitsâ€¦and rats like you and I will still plunder it piece by piece. Don't you see? It's never gonna stop, Chris. It's just gonna go on and on. It's the way it's always worked and it ain't never gonna change. It's time we get smart and exact our piece of the pie. No one's holding their breath for justice anymore."

No answer. Chris glanced around at the grandeur of the ring, at the random faces that whisked by. He felt it again, the same feeling that crept in every time he was alone with Sergei: uncertainty. It tugged at his moral fibers, tested his core integrity, spawned splotches of grey over his black & white lense. He loathed it, and yet he couldn't ignore it. It was like some primordial chemical reaction taking a hold, a deep-seeded survival instinct that needed pondering by higher brain functions.

"I'll tell you a little secret about the universe, Chris. Something that not even Bill could enlighten you on. The universe is not black and white. It isn't right and wrong, or good and evil. The universe is indifferent. It's atoms and galaxies and people, every single thing in existence just out for themselves on random collision courses. You can live your life like the preacher-man and hope you'll never run into anything else, drifting blindly and ignorantly. You can be like Justin, quietly doing what he thinks is right even at the expense of his self. Or, Hell, if you want you can stay behind the scenes like the administrator and let the world do the dirty work for

you without lifting a finger. But you know deep down you're not free just because you escaped Traxus Nine. If you won't admit that now, you will later. Take my word or find out the hard way by seeing for yourself."

"I know you're good at this sort of thing. Hey, you wiggled us free from _these _people and it only took you, what, a couple of hours? Just a walk in the park for you. Salinger scared me shitless and to you he was just a bottom-feeder. I thought I had you pegged pretty well myself. I'm a pretty good judge of character, but youâ€|you're all over the place. The sad thing is I _want _to trust you but the risk is too great for me. Which brings us right back to me joining the United Earth Space Corps. I'm gonna leave this all behind and fight the good fight, as long as there is one."

"You've been hanging around the preacher too much. I read the Bible once. Felt it didn't apply to a lot of what's going on these days."

"And probably missed out on a pretty important topic when you read that."

"What?"

"Forgiveness."

"Forgiveness." Sergei scowled. "No such thing in my book. You do a deed and it's finished. Nothing we do is ever forgotten."

"It's not forgetting. It's forgiving. There's a difference."

"Okay, explain the difference."

"Forgiveness redeemed you at Traxus Nine when you saved me. If not for what you did right then and there, Justin would not have let you come with us. In fact, I'm willing to bet he'd have killed you."

"That was not forgiveness."

"Oh, what was it then?"

"It was a calculated decision made by a man drowning in his own guilt. He realized he was wrong about me all these years. He realized, just like me and everyone else in that place, that Gibson and people like Gibson were the ones responsible for creating the world Traxus Nine became. Justin chose the lesser of two evils, Chris. It's that simple."

"But surely you saved me for that reason. You wouldn't have made it out of that bay if you hadn't been the one who saved me, you know that."

"I saved your life because I was right there next to you. I did it because it was the right thing to do, not because your life was my bargaining chip. Do you really think me one-dimensional? Like I'm supposed to remain the bad guy all the time? Last time I checked, I was still human. I'm capable of doing the right thing just as much as anyone else. Besides, my quarrel was never with you."

Chris stared up at the empty pair of Russian eyes that stared ahead. It was easy to hate Sergei.

Chris adamantly trained his gaze there while keeping in step, wondering how much credence could actually be lent to any of his words. _When is he_ ever _readable?_ Chris thought.

The boy continued his laborious attempt at figuring him out at the core, what it was that _really_ made him tick beyond all that talk. Those pitch-black irises sucked in everything and everyone everywhere he went, learning all in milliseconds yet offering nothing in return like twin blackholes.

There were _many_ reasons to hate Sergei, Chris now realized. Was he allowed to be anything other than what he'd been? Was it acceptable that the man still had a shred of decency in him? Should it even be possible?

Were any of his selfless acts just part of a larger design?

Chris' mind raced, his thoughts disdained against the man walking by his side. How could Sergei forgive _himself_ so easily?

Chris' blood temperature began to rise, evident to himself by the prickling all over his skin and the warming of his cheeks. In compensation, the swarm of nanobots assigned to his clothing began to circulate throughout the weaves and layers with self-locomotive flight, removing the bacteria and moisture and replacing it with a cool, dry sensation that whisked over his epidermis. And somewhere in that swarm of his own hatred, the voice of Bill then crept in, the Priest's deep and soothing resonance stilling all of the boy's rage into a pond of serenity. He imagined what Bill would say and do, here and now.

Chris instantlyâ€”almost involuntarilyâ€”let go of his hate as if it were a bag of lead falling to the floor. It seemed as though his footsteps lightened the longer he willed it away, and his muscles de-tensed. Holding onto the hate any longer would only bog his self down and simply perpetuate more of the same vicious cycle that he'd witnessed over and over in others. And here they were, right on the cusp of another change. It wasn't hard to see it. In fact, Ken's self-deprecating personality had all but vanished, replaced by a calm assertiveness long dormant. The way he stood up to Virgil topside was tantamount to the courage Justin had always displayed when the going got tough. Indeed, Chris couldn't be consumed in the past, not now. Just as everyone's fate was changing, so too were they.

Chris took his eyes off Sergei and began to look forward. "I guess I was wrong about you. _Certain_ things."

Sergei grunted, tugged once at the lapels of his jacket. "Thanks."

"So since you're capable of change like I always knew you were, maybe you can also work on learning to forgive."

"Maybeâ€”" Sergei stared pensively ahead as the two of them had just about arrived at Quadrant One, where the doorway to their fate lied. "â€”but I've seen how forgiveness works before, and I think that upon entering this room and learning a few more things, you might just

change your mind once you see what forgiveness breeds."

Together they stepped up to the portal and Sergei reached out, grabbed hold of a chrome-plated doorknob, twisted, and pushed open.

Kaiser Sergei and Chris emerged into a room—petite, stately, just enough space to accommodate a small gathering of VIPs. Ken, Bill and Hendricksson were seated around the circumference of a round table adjacent to the far bulkhead, Chris understood, but he couldn't stop his eyes from wandering.

Chris hadn't any words to say of the sights around him. He was speechless.

The volcanic glass walls glistened onyx behind a lining of fine, metallic mesh—effectively a Faraday Cage absorbing electromagnetic probing attempts. The designers certainly could've embedded the protective screen inside the walls, but instead chose to expose it and line it with fist-sized diamonds, an avarice beyond measure. The round table and the cold floor were hewn from albino marble, as well as all seating surfaces.

Sergei held the door open, gesturing inside. Chris gaited past him as though dazed in a sleepwalk. He moseyed around the table to a vacant seat, sinking down into a crimson-colored cushion of Alcantara suede.

Most of the survivor collective had grazed over their surroundings with lustful, envious eyes for what seemed like an hour, though no one actually knew how much time had elapsed. Sergei only recently became aware of the many eyes boring into him as if probing for answers.

"Alright, here's the deal." he said, sinking deeper into the chair. "The Earth government and the UNSC are under immense pressure from bureaucrats and their constituents to lower shipping costs. It's a real shit storm out there. Apparently it's been pretty rampant with the way companies like THI have operated on a whole these past few years, and not just at this place. THI has floated way above the profit margins for too long, milking the system on a galactic level. New management is taking over operations here. It's someone else's turn now. Take over the show for awhile and enact some competition in order to lower the price-per-pound a little."

"The UNSC arranged this siege?" Ken asked.

"Hard to say. I know it's easy to insinuate them, but this doesn't have their handwriting on it. More likely, the UNSC just gave them their blessing and looked away as usual. Normally the government would step in themselves when the free market can't pull itself up by the bootstraps, right? Well, they've got their hands tied with the Covenant, so I'm guessing they hired somebody to fix things instead. Contracted out their will to a private firm and _they_ do the deed—however it gets done. But I personally believe that the people doing the actual business here have got their own agendas as well. It's always been a corporate 'tag, you're it' with the Big Three. At times, it becomes a corporate food fight. That's big business for ya. It's cutthroat. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you'll get caught in the undertow. Sound familiar?"

"What about the space stations?" Chris stared intently at Sergei.
"Are they still operational?"

"It would be simpler to leave them intact rather than re-invent the wheel, kid. I'm sure these guys won't destroy 'em. They'll surely find a way to cannibalize them instead."

Chris nodded and eased back in his chair.

"Contrary to what you might be thinking right now, this new sheriff in town wants the gears well-greased. They want the people down there to survive and work as usual. The food drops will still go on until THI finds out what happened here and shuts down the patterns for good."

"Patterns?"

"The freighters that run up and down the shipping lanes to and from Traxus Nine, the A-to-B route. You don't need ship captains for that so they just set 'em on autopilot and it saves costs. Think."

"Well, that's good they're keeping it all running."

"Yeah, well it won't be long until THI discovers the truth. This outfit here will have to stand up a new supply line before THI shuts the existing one down, and they'll have to get the space station under full control along with the space planes inside it because they'll probably lock all that down remotely as well. But it's nothing these guys can't handle. In all likelihood, such contingencies are already at work. You don't just stage an operation like this without thinking it through. And the people won't suffer that long, if at all, Chris."

"What about the NMA? Where have they been?"

"They've sided with the new big fish in the pond. They're now employed by this company, no longer THI."

"The fighters that we saw destroyed in space, that wasn't the NMA?"

"No, that was just another contracted security force that THI must've bought out. Private security is not the NMA's gig."

"Great, one more set of inglorious bastards at large."

"Are you finished?" Sergei sat straighter and rested his forearms on the table, addressing everyone in an almost professional manner.
"Back to the real issue, our futures. They've let me in on their business prospectus a little bit. They're putting some smarts into this whole shipping business now, more robots and computers down below. That's right, most of it is going automated like it always should've been. Very little need for human intervention from here on out. They'll incur a heavy cost in the beginning, but they'll make up for it in the long run—so they tell me." Sergei grinned, "Guess that works out well for people down there like us, eh? No need to cloud your conscience anymore."

"Did you manage to weasel yourself in for a cut?" Hendricksson asked

coolly.

"Let's just say that I had many connections off-world that retained their worth even ten years later. We'll be getting a visit from the corporate attorney, no less. So sit back and watch the show."

"Why an attorney?" Chris asked.

"If we're to live, we must indemnify both companies, Traxus and this one."

"Indemnify?"

"Swear and oath of silence, Chris. Sell our souls."

"You're certain this is the only way?"

"I've worked it out. I did my best. This is the only way." Sergei nodded solemnly. "Like it or not, the captains of industry lead the human race into its tomorrows. We're going to experience that first handâ€"

The door slowly opened. All eyes in the room diverted to it.

A man whom none of them had ever seen stepped inside, paused momentarily at the entrance.

"â€and speak of the Devil."

He was slender and dapperly dressed, his grooming well kempt. Curiously, he remained at the threshold so he could get a good look at them, or so they could to get a good look at himâ€no one was certain which.

The fabric of his well-hemmed, three-piece suit draped silkily and practically flowed like water over his regal, Etruscan posture. Sporting no jewelry, the man might as well have as any visible skin practically glowed with the work of expensive massage treatment and skin conditioners, the fragrance of exotic oils barely masked by equally expensive cologne. Two-toned gator skin shoes glistened as well. The man sported a chrome tie tack and cuff links which contrasted perfectly against his pinstriped, charcoal-grey attire. Head to toe, the man who was presumably 'the attorney' most certainly dressed for success. The sheer cost of his eye-pleasing ensemble was unfathomable, possibly worth more than all the wages each survivor had labored for in any year of their livesâ€combined. Every visual detail about the man was custom-tailored and oozed class. Stationary at the entrance, his ambisure immediately contracted as if he'd just bit into a fresh lemon. The look on his face spoke volumes; he was certainly not amused by the sight before him.

His right arm was bent forward nearly at a right angle, cradling something. Rather, he carried a few small objects. Nestled in the crook of his elbow were what looked to be a stack of datapads. As Everyone got more comfortable, the businessman stepped forth.

At first, he hovered a couple of paces away from the roundtable, staring at Ken for a moment, surmising he held influence over the group jointly with Miroslav. He then glanced around at each of them individually, assessing their receptivity in perfect silence.

Hastily, he lapped around the circumference of the table, breaking stride only briefly behind each of the seated occupants to place a datapad in front of them.

"What's this?" Ken asked, staring down at it.

"Our gesture of comity." he said sharply, placing the last datapad down in front of Sergei. He then hurriedly stepped away from the table, positioning himself firmly in the center of the room. A certain amount of agitation was palpable over him, apparently resultant of some distaste the survivors gave him. "Actually, more like a non-disclosure agreement."

Ken peered down into the screen and saw the company logo of a Tterrab Industries. Near the bottom of the emblem was a single lowercase 'a'.

Utter silence prevailed as everyone listened in.

"I've been authorized to offer every one of you a contract." the attorney said. "It's legal and it's binding, so don't undermine it or you will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. And don't be whistle-blowers thinking you can go into hiding. You're not safe in police custody. We have field operatives at every colony world. We're even embedded into rebel strongholds. We're at planets you've never even heard of, too. You will be found if you go against the terms. You've been given this get-out-of-jail-free card, so don't screw it up. Read the contract and scroll to the bottom where you will sign and date. You all will be given transport to any colony of your choosing, but only one, so get a consensus going quickly."

"Is this a sick joke?" Ken asked. "What's the catch you're not telling us about?"

"Shut up." Hendricksson glared at Ken. "Don't jinx this for me."

"Perfectly good question." Ken fired back.

Both a plea and a scorn suddenly appeared in Hendricksson's eyes. "I spent the last five hundred years asleep and I already know that this is the only way out of that Hell-hole we worked so hard to escape from. Let's not question this, okay?"

The legal representative of Tterrab Industries powered his voice over both of them and stepped closer. "Mister Sergei brokered this deal for you, and the catch has already been taken care of. You will sign the contract if you value his friendship. Or don't, I don't care."

"So what is the deal?" Ken asked.

"Read the contract, Mister Sopher."

Ken scowled as he grabbed hold of the pad's stylus and tapped the scroll bar along the right side of the screen. He hated it when people used his last name.

Passing the table of contents and the preface, Ken suddenly looked confounded, the subtle wrinkles of his face deepening. After reading

the opening sentence of the contract's first paragraph, he knew the rest wasn't worth looking at because it was loaded with legalese the likes of which he'd never seen before. The syntax and jargon was so abstruse that it might as well have been conceived in another language. "Well, it's kind of long. Are you really sure you want me to sit here and read the whole thing?"

"Basically, the deal is you are free to go. Mister Sergei drove a great bargain, I must say. You can trust he's done the right thing for you."

With a flick of his wrist, Ken tossed the datapad onto the table and leaned back. The device clattered a few times as it coasted a short distance across the smooth surface, gently coming to rest in the middle. Ken crossed his arms over his chest. "Just like that, we're off the hook. What do you take me for?"

"Your part of the deal, Mister Sopher, is to keep quiet. Never consider yourself off the hook. Just enjoy what life you have leftâ€|unless of course you'd like to stay here and work for us."

Ken shot forward and snatched the datapad back, hastily scrolling to the end of the document.

Chris rested his hands atop the wide slab of cool marble. "What if I refuse?"

"Then I leave your fate to our board of directors, who aren't as forthcoming as I am."

"Chris," Joe coaxed, "don't do it."

The attorney boomed over them again. "If you refuse, my guess is you'd get tossed right back down into that shit hole where you came from. You know perfectly well we don't have to play nice, so take your pick: a new life or the same old Hell. Though, I wouldn't be far from the truth if I said that Traxus Heavy Industries would never have extended you such courtesies. I advise you to consent with the terms of the contract."

"You know," Ken smiled brightly at the attorney, "you're right." He looked over all the faces seated around him and swept away the blonde locks hanging over his face. "They don't have to be this nice. We're finally free after this. Our life down there is over after thiâ€"

"â€"if one could call it a life." the man pursed his lips and checked his timepiece.

"Thank you!" Joe shouted.

"Corporate-sponsored asylum." Sergei grinned. "The best kind there is."

Ken glanced at each of his fellow survivors. "This is a good deal, guys. Hell, it's the only deal."

"Very well, then." the suit said. "Get a consensus of your destination quickly. We want you out of sight no later than twelve

hours from now."

"Do we get a copy of this?" Ken asked, squinting. The look on the man's face was enough of an answer. "Right, didn't think so."

Tterrab Industries' one-man legal counsel thoughtfully gazed upon the faces seated at the table as they peered into the screens of their individual datapads. After genuine moments of scrutiny, he assumed the best. "Tell me what kind of work you did do down there." He deftly pointed at each survivor, one by one starting with Ken.

"I pretty much just sorted through scrap metal." he shrugged.

"The same," Joe lied, "just a conveyor monkey."

"Priesthood duties." Bill said. "Other than that, I mostly sorted mineral ore."

Sergei smiled. "When not plotting assassinations on administrators, my employees trafficked narcotics among other things."

The attorney shook his head and finally rested his gaze upon Chris. "You there, boy, what did you do for a living down there?"

Chris lifted his stoic gaze. "I learned magnaflux inspections recently."

"The most skilled worker out of any of you is the youngest. How did you come to learn that trade, young man?"

"A great man taught me."

"And how did you consider the treatment down there?"

"I survived."

"Exactly my point, Chris. We see people as our greatest asset, not as tools to be used and discarded. And that is exactly why we are here, to make things right as they should be."

Chris raised his chin at the attorney. "If that is really your intent, then we will definitely obey the contract. We won't make any waves."

"Good. And I assure you, you'll have no problem finding work elsewhere. We'd offer you a high-paying contract, but we strictly adhere to child labor laws."

"A hostile takeover of Traxus Heavy Industries' crown jewel," the Kaiser smirked, "and yet you adhere to child labor laws. Interesting mix of business ethics if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you. Let me tell you something about Tterrab Industries. We have come to clean up this planet's operations. We've been the middle man in this business ever since they stole this planet. We've specialized in intrastellar transit for far too long. We're branching out. At the behest of the UEG, we're expanding our role in this industry because our business model is far more efficient than any other. We offer the best and we take care of our

own, and that's because we care. We're faster, cheaper, more reliable, better in every way which equates to lower costs for all clients. Ultimately, it leads to more business and increasing revenue. This, in turn, equates to the infusion of employee benefits. We are going to revamp this entire enterprise, starting with this place. Who really wants to work for substandard compensation and in such a hostile environment? Do you? Production can certainly improve if quality of life improves."

"And by better care," Chris said, "does that include restoring the workers' choice to leave whenever they choose? Do they get their basic freedoms back?"

The legal professional's jaw clenched like a vice grip as his eyes swung towards Chris, both hands now as fists at his sides. He offered no response for a marked amount of time. "I'm afraid that is not possible. Understand that your situation is unique and you should consider yourself extremely lucky to be here. Those workers down there possess knowledge of prior events that would not only jeopardize our prospects here, but gravely impact the commonwealth of the entire industry. All people of this world including you represent significant risk to galactic security, and there are only so many pardons Tterrab Industries is willing to grant as consequence. No, I'm afraid they would not be allowed to leave."

Chris nodded. "I see. And are you going down there with armed force to attain order again? I meanâ€¦you'd have to, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"With mercenaries?"

"UNSC is stretched terribly thin, so ideally yes."

"Would it perhaps be the New Model Army you're bringing down there?"

"Is your middle name Rhetorical Question? Put yourself in the shoes of a decision maker. What do you think? You already know the NMA has a proven track record for managing this exact scenario. The collateral damage of that same, exact scenario would now be greatly watered down considering these denizens have experienced it before. And for their sake, I hope they've learned something from it. Cooperation among the populace might not be unanimous at first, but it would be relatively easier to attain compared to the event that occurred years ago."

"â€¦I see."

"How did you even know about THI's past here and the outcome of the planet?" Sergei asked with eyes down, skimming his document. "With THI's quality of damage control, I thought they had a pretty good lid on things."

"By high quality damage control, I assume you're referring to their internal policy of holding workers as prisoners and destroying any vessel that tried to leave the planet. In that case, yes, they had a very tight lid on things and now we're the ones forced to maintain such an oppressive security measure. Mister Sergei, we pay top credit for research on our competitors. Several informants on the

inside readily came forward. This takeover practically presented itself to us the very moment UNSC fiscal projections confirmed that transport tariffs would grow inequitable throughout the colonies unless somebody did something." The attorney's eyes suddenly slanted and became glazed over with a backlit anger. "_We_ did something, for the good of the galaxy!"

Expressionless, Sergei simply watched the attorney with his untelling, black eyes. Seconds later, he went back to reading his contract.

The attorney pulled down on the tails of his drop-hemmed jacket and smoothed out any wrinkles it might've had. He then straightened his tie and stood even more erect, an air of nobility about him after his passionate discourse.

Satisfied that the others' scrutiny was now devoted solely to their contracts, he glanced at a nearby stretch of plexiplaste that ran the gamut of the starboard bulkhead. He slowly and leisurely gaited towards it.

There it was: Traxus IX. The system's star fully illuminated the world and made it appear as a two-dimensional disc. The muted whites of its chemical-clouds roiling and the patches of orange-brown wasteland were poised together in space like a slow-churning ball of muddy water, like a toy he could reach out and hold if he so chose. He remained there waiting on everyone's endorsements, taking in the sight of the voluminous sphere, perhaps musing over the era to come of peace and prosperity in the empire he labored for. The fires of industry would burn anew, brighter than ever before.

One by one, the survivors skimmed over the contract's bottommost block of text, whatever of it was comprehensible. Chris drew out the curve of the last letter in his surname and pressed the 'Submit' button off to the side of the signature block, watching the screen fade to black with finality. There was no going back, now. Each of them had just about signed their life away, except one. Chris glanced to his right where the only motion in the room still occurred. He watched Sergei's eyes drift from left to right, top to bottom over the touchscreen.

"Hey," Chris nodded, "you haven't signed yet. What's up?"

"I'm reading the whole thing."

"Why?"

Sergei gently set his datapad down, then met Chris' eyes. "My contract is a little different than yours."

Chris nodded respectfully. "I won't ask."

Sergei went back to reading. "Much appreciated."

Chris looked away and glanced about the room. He found the attorney's reflection in the window.

Chris would usually avoid being judgmental of people on a whim, giving others the benefit of the doubt despite his keen perception. To no fault of his own, he was endowed with natural ability to

quickly figure someone out. Even still, he always figured there was something more in them to bear witness to, some underlying qualities that were only manifested during extraordinary times. Quintessentially, everyone's future was unwritten; anyone could change; and therefore no one deserved judgment until the end.

But somehow, Chris felt deep down in his gut that the attorney was unique.

The boy leaned to his left with a whisper. "How long until we could hit Reach?"

"Depending on the efficiency of the slipspace drive, probably a week." Ken hushed back. "Give or take."

"Good enough." Chris looked around the room one last time. He saw Sergei again, who was already beaming back at him.

"Still believe in forgiveness, Chris?"

The boy didn't answer, but was clearly provoked by the question.

"You can tell a lie and still be a good man." he whispered. "It doesn't matter how big the lie is if it's for the right reasons."

"What are you saying?"

Sergei eyes locked harder with Chris'. "And sometimes, the most immoral deed is actually the most ethical decision available."

Sergei had a strange look about him as if he knew something profoundly important but was unable to express it in words. Chris might've understood what he meant if he was clearer, but only a moment was all that would be required for the meaning to sink in.

The boy looked toward the window again, found the human reflection lingering there. "We're finished, sir."

The attorney's thoughts remained outside the hull, his gaze clouded with thought and fixed on that murky, bleak world below.

"â€|That's very good, Chris. You've made the right choice."

"We've decided on our destination, too."

"Good," he said, "very good. Now, is there anything I should know about before I take my associates planet-side?"

Chris thought about the question...

Fleeting images of death and chaos spun in his mind, the thousands who had died and the millions to follow. Criminally-insane warlords, fervent parasites, ravenous zombies, and the discombobulating blades in the groundâ€"they all reigned over Traxus IX now.

...He glanced sidelong at Kaiser Sergei, a mere instant of eye

contact.

"Nope," Chris said, "it's all yours."

_**-THE END-**-

End
file.